

The Love Before the First

Number Twenty Majuba Road is tucked into the back streets of a quiet little West Country town, and when the powerful and blustering figure of Uncle Hector arrives, he brings a flutter into the women's hearts and a good deal of uneasiness into the men's. Young Alan admires him, for he is an officer, a charmer and a swell, but he becomes associated in his mind with the new anxieties which have entered his child's world. This is a gay and touching novel about a real family, who quarrel and laugh, who weep and aspire. In this child's vision of an adult world, the author has pointed to all that is incongruous and inconstant in adult behaviour, giving a picture of family life which is shot through with humour and affection.

BOOKS BY
GILBERT PHELPS

FICTION

The Dry Stone

A Man in His Prime

The Centenarians

The Love Before the First

CRITICISM

The Russian Novel in English Fiction

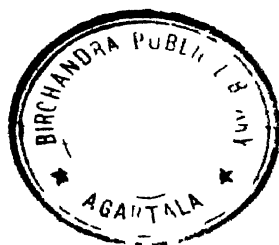
GENERAL

Living Writers (Editor)

Another version of this appeared in America
under the title of *The Heart in the Desert*

GILBERT PHELPS

The Love Before the First



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CHAPTER ONE

The bugle scratched at the edges of Alan's consciousness. It was a familiar sound. As a rule, he would have had no difficulty in dismissing it, to fall back at once into the kernel of sleep. He wondered why, this morning, it had pushed so far. But an ache in the calf of his leg and a touch of cold on his forehead supplemented the irritation in his ear-drums. He moved his leg, and his heel encountered first a sheet and, beneath it, a chill slippery sensation. Puzzled, he moved his heel. It slid easily for a few inches and then stuck on a patch of rougher texture. He remembered the linoleum, green with sprays of white blossom: in the places where it was worn it was easy to pick through to the canvas backing. It was the chill of the linoleum, he realised, that lay on his body.

He turned his head to the right and saw the bed, ghostly in the subdued light: sleepily he wondered why he wasn't in it. After a while he became conscious of a pressure on his left shoulder. Meg's head was burrowing into it. Nothing of her face was to be seen, only the tangled curls: it might have been a mop lying there. Her knees were drawn up, touching her stomach: her hands were folded in front of her like the paws of a small animal.

His head fell back on the pillow. From this angle the dormer window looked larger than usual. It was filled with an expanse of sky, its colour suspended at the exact point when the blue of a summer day begins to run into the silver grey of dawn, as when you dip a paint-brush tipped with royal blue into a cup of clean water. It was impossible to catch the moment when the two colours mingled, but suddenly the blue became pre

dominant, leaving only a wisp of white, almost indistinguishable like a flaw on a sheet of paper when it is held up to the light.

The bugle sounded again, an excruciating rendering of 'Come to the Cook House Door, Boys!' tailing off into a discordant caterwauling. The spurts of sound conjured up the dents and tooth-marks on the mouthpiece and the taste of tarnished metal. He wriggled his shoulder away from Meg's face. She muttered, but went on sleeping, her face buried in the pillow. He sat up cautiously. A bed creaked and he looked over his shoulder. Molly's bed was in the far corner where the sloping ceiling cast a shadow; her body was an indistinct blur under the bed-clothes, though the left-hand brass knob at the foot of her bed—from which he had pulled a sliver like very thin orange-peel the day before—was already catching the sun.

He slid out from under the quilt. He was still sufficiently sleepy to feel astonished when his feet encountered the floor. Yawning he went over to the window. He pushed it open: the ivy thrust a fistful of leaves and twigs through the gap between frame and hinge and there was a faint rustle of complaint from a bird's nest near-by. As soon as he put out his head Greg stopped playing his bugle, let out his shriek—too familiar to strike Alan as either weird or comic—'Oh, me nerves! Oh, me nerves!' and slammed his own window shut. Alan could still hear him prancing up and down in his bedroom, talking excitedly to himself.

His eyes dropped from Greg's window to Greg's garden—or rather 'back yard', a distinction on which the grown-ups of his own household placed great stress. The whole of the far side was taken up by a rickety shed or lean-to with a rusty corrugated iron roof pitted with holes. In this shed Greg's brothers, who were window-cleaners and part-time decorators, kept buckets, tins of paint, mysterious drums and barrels, a hand-

cart with one wheel that wobbled, and an assortment of brushes, sacks, and dirty cloths. Greg occasionally helped his brothers: but he fell off ladders easily, and whenever the work began to pall he would start shrieking: 'Oh, me nerves!' He was cunning enough for that, but in other respects everybody in Majuba Road knew that he wasn't 'all there'.

The bugle, nevertheless, was a relic of military service. Nobody knew how, but Greg had been called up in 1918, put in khaki, shipped to France, and hastily shipped back again. He had managed to acquire the bugle in the process. He had also retained a khaki tunic, from which the buttons had been torn. For the rest he wore his brothers' discarded working clothes – shiny black trousers streaked with paint and whitewash, and a faded fawn cap which gaped above the peak where the press-stud no longer functioned.

Few of the neighbours were on speaking terms with Greg's family. They were considered 'common'. They quarrelled a good deal and got drunk on Saturday nights. Sometimes crashings and bangings came from their house, and a hollow, thudding sound which Alan and Meg had recently realised, with a pleasurable thrill, was caused by fists. After these rows members of the family, even old Mrs Travers, were to be seen with swollen lips and blackened eyes. According to Alan's and Meg's parents, the Travers ought not to be living in Majuba Road at all. Old Mr Travers himself, it was true, was something of an anomaly; it was rumoured that he had attended the Grammar School and at times, the grown-ups said, he was 'quite the gentleman'. He proved this by staring at people rudely and speaking, when the spirit seized him, in 'a pie-jaw manner'. This did not spare him his share of black eyes: it was usually he who started the quarrels. He was a little, bent man, who wore an oil-stained mackintosh; his face was thin and grey; the furrows by his cheeks and mouth always appeared to be filled with a floury grime, and this was quite likely as a haze of powdered paint,

whitewash and mortar hung over the Travers' back yard. But there was no doubt that he had 'come down in the world': 'by rights,' the grown-ups declared, 'the Travers family belonged to "the back streets".'

The 'back streets' indeed were only a few yards away, behind the high brick wall that ran along the ends of the gardens in Majuba Road. Reminders of this proximity arrived in the form of raucous sounds, smells from a pickle and jam factory, an old boot or a broken enamel jug, or some more unsavoury memento. But for the inhabitants of Majuba Road the boundary was as sacrosanct as the theological distinction between heaven and hell: the two areas might be contiguous, but never could they meet. To Alan and Meg, however, the idea of Majuba Road without the small corner of iniquity represented by the Travers was unthinkable. Not so much because they added variety and drama to the scene, but because they were at an age when everything that is, is and ever more shall be so. Between the closing of an eye and its opening things might be different, but that had nothing to do with change: one set of immutable circumstances had merely been exchanged for another. They were not yet conscious of the slidings and lapsings of time, although in Alan's case uncomfortable pangs and premonitions had begun.

His eyes travelled round the rest of the Travers' yard. There were several other sheds, made of heterogeneous materials – sheets of ply-wood, the sides of petrol-cans hammered flat, sacking, and even an old wire-mesh mattress. What space was not taken up by sheds were given over to scraggy hens. They were clucking plaintively and scratching about in the black tacky earth which was stuck with feathers and fluff, old tin-cans, and pale green cabbage stumps. He shuddered at the thought of picking up eggs from amongst so much filth. In the whole of the Travers' domain there was not a single flower or a single blade of grass.

By contrast the garden of their next-door neighbour, Mr Cowcher, was like the picture on a packet of seeds. Or rather a series of pictures, for Mr Cowcher had a passion for landscape gardening. When Alan and Meg looked out of the back bedroom window there was no telling what they might see in the garden next door. Sometimes there would be a lawn, as even as green baize; sometimes the lawn would be surrounded by flowers; at others, shrubs or even a row of dwarf apple trees would appear; sometimes half the lawn would vanish and a kitchen garden would emerge at one end. At other times it would be gone completely, to be replaced by crazy-paving, or a pool with gnomes fishing for goldfish which lurked beneath water-lilies, their petals like white wax, their leaves like bronze foil.

Mr Cowcher was also fond of erecting various structures in his twenty-five yards by ten estate. Once he devised a replica of the Willow Pattern plate, with pools, rockeries and a bridge. One hot July he set up a marquee which he had bought cheap at an auction. It occupied practically the whole of his garden and overshadowed not only his own house, but the houses on either side. The reactions of the Traverses were swift and noisy and the marquee was replaced by a summer-house, complete to a veranda with green and white railings, where Mr Cowcher and his wife sat in deck-chairs, eating picnic teas and boiling kettles on a spirit stove, although from where they sat they could easily have reached through the kitchen window and operated the gas-cooker.

He was particularly ingenious in camouflaging the water closet. Most of the houses in Majuba Road had outside conveniences, and these were the source of much embarrassment. Sometimes Mr Cowcher would shroud his with trellis-work, aglow with pink roses; at others with basket-work, covered with honeysuckle or spattered with purple flowers as big as dinner-plates. Once he designed an elongated porch with an alcove on

either side in which wicker chairs were placed, and on another occasion a structure reminiscent of the Bridge of Sighs.

Mr Cowcher had the greenest of green fingers and his passion was so strong that in warm weather he often worked at night, and Alan would wake up to hear his wheezing breath (he suffered from asthma), the scraping of his trowel, and the loving pats of his hands upon soil and turf. Nevertheless, when he and Meg looked through the window in the morning it seemed that the transformation had taken place at the wave of a wand. The stages between the sowing of the seed and the blooming of the flower were blanks to them, and they hardly noticed the preliminary work or the debris of preparation. They didn't take account of a thing until it was in front of their eyes, so that the changes seemed to have taken place in a single night. There had been no gradual change, only a stepping from one finished scene to the next.

At the moment, however, Mr Cowcher's garden was as it had been yesterday, and therefore as it had always been. There *was* a lawn – as green as pea-pods, though it was bitten into by stars and crescents filled with big furry lemon and mauve flowers. The garden to Alan's right, however, was stark and forbidding, like the chapel-going Mr Poole. There were a few bent and gnarled fruit trees at one end: the rest was given over to tall, gloomy cabbages, knobbly Brussels sprouts and unkempt curly kale. It was a firm belief of Alan and Meg that the stalks of these vegetables were crusted with icicles all the year round. The grass grew thick and stringy round their roots and was populated by large black slugs. The Curtises on the other side of the Pooles liked privacy and had built a high fence, but Alan could see the tops of apple trees and through a broken board a green water-butt. A model aeroplane was nailed to the top of the Curtises' clothes-line post and the whirring of its propeller was one of the minor irritations of life in Majuba Road.

During this survey to right and left Alan had deliberately

ignored his own garden. But at last he let his eyes drop downwards. This was the moment that really began the day. He had only to lower his eyes to shut off all the other gardens, and indeed the whole of Majuba Road and the world beyond. It was like plunging into a green well.

There was, in fact, such a depth of growth in such a narrow space that their garden *was* like a tank. Neither Alan's nor Meg's father liked gardening: everything was neglected, and yet everything was luxuriant and all kinds of different plants seemed to thrive side by side as if they had arrived at an unnatural but mutual tolerance.

The hedges on either side were particularly exuberant. They were never trimmed, from this side at any rate, though both Mr Cowcher and Mr Poole fought to keep them from encroaching on their own territories. Where they were left to their own devices they grew high, sending up long, whippy branches feathered with dark leaves. The older of these leaves were as big as spear-heads, and so thick that you could dent them with your thumb-nail without breaking them.

The hedges also spread outwards, and this was of importance to Alan and Meg. For although the effect was to reduce the garden to a narrow corridor, so that the women were always complaining that branches snatched at them when they were hanging up the washing, the protuberances higher up made the space below seem almost limitless to Alan and Meg. They got much the same sensation when they were sitting among the legs of grown-ups, and sometimes Alan had the fancy that the hedges were two rows of corpulent adults and that he and Meg had only to sink below the level of their bellies to a private world where the gaze of the adults, for sheer structural reasons, was unable to follow.

The rest of the garden was equally neglected, and sometimes Mr Cowcher climbed his kitchen steps and peered over the top of the hedge, his face screwed up in anguish at the sight of so

much untamed confusion. On several occasions when Alan's or Meg's father had been sick he had offered to help them by 'seeing to the garden'. Alan and Meg were profoundly grateful that these offers were refused. They had the effect, it is true, of provoking their fathers to temporary shame and to half-hearted efforts to 'see to the garden' themselves. But these attempts always petered out. Blisters or the weather intervened, and if these failed, the shears broke or proved to have mysteriously 'lost their edge'. Alan and Meg were convinced that this was no accident. They noticed that it happened even after their fathers had ground the blades on the rickety old grindstone that stood by the kitchen door and was turned by a handle that had lost its haft. They saw that the grass still evaded the action of the shears, refusing to be cut and wrapping itself round the blades in a juicy green mass, winding itself round nut and screw. They could not but believe that such obstinacy was calculated, and they breathed a sigh of partisan relief when they saw the father whose turn it had been to be conscience-pricked get up from his knees, glance quickly at the window to see if the women were watching, and stealthily return the shears to their nail in the wash-house.

They were proud of their wilderness of a garden. There were no hedges in the whole of Majuba Road to equal theirs, and no one had grass as rich and thick. Except where a faint and uneven path had been worn, as if prodded by the ferrule of a stick, they could bury their arms up to the elbows. They could clasp tufts to their chests as broad as sheaves of corn. In summer these clumps were dry and warm near the top and a dark honey colour, and these top parts would flap in the breeze like fringes. Lower down the grass was dark green, almost black; farther down still it became a lighter colour, cool and juicy, and close to the earth it was moist and yellow. And yet in spite of its vigorous growth it yielded along the sides of the garden to gooseberry bushes and raspberry canes. There was also a lilac

tree, with blossoms like corn cobs, the separate flowers the size and colour of grapes. At the bottom of the garden there was an elderberry tree which bore great sprays of flowers, yellowish white like clotted cream, giving way to berries as hard as green pebbles, and in due course to red and purple fruit as big as blackcurrants. Hollyhocks and sunflowers grew along the fence that concealed the dustbins and the water-closet.

Greg had opened his window again and was playing his bugle fiercely, as if determined to choke some response out of it. A moment later Alan heard a familiar bang: it was Greg's brother Rodney, who slept in the room next to his, throwing his boots at the wall. It was followed by a yell of 'Stop that din or I'll clip yer ear 'ole!' Supporting yells and growls, of varying volume, came from other parts of the Travers' house. Greg broke off in the middle of a high note, let out a defiant, 'Oh, me nerves!' and slammed his window. He would not venture forth again until he was quite certain it was time to get up. His brothers had threatened to confiscate the bugle, and though Alan suspected that their ill-nature did not extend beyond black eyes, bestowed almost affectionately, Greg had decided to be on the safe side. The Travers household subsided. Those neighbours far enough away to be spared the worst of Greg's discords had not stirred. Soon, upon the whole of Majuba Road, descended that absolute stillness, profounder, than at any part of the night, that belonged to the last thirty minutes before the first milkman arrived and the first shovel rattled in the coal-cellar.

Alan closed his own window. He looked down at Meg. She was lying on her back now, but though her eyes were shut he knew she was awake. He went over to the wash-stand, dipped the edge of the towel in the water-jug and knelt down beside the makeshift bed.

'I'll do the sleepies, Meg.'

She sat up and held her face towards him. He bathed round the sticky eyelashes. They began to flutter and then sprang

apart. Her eyes were round and blue: the lashes still had specks on them like pollen. The mop of hair was woolly like a poodle's: it was a brownish yellow in colour like Demarara sugar.

It was quite light now, but she peered round^h her in a bewildered way as she did every morning, a frown wrinkling the top of her nose. Suddenly it struck her that the circumstances were out of the ordinary and her lips formed an 'O' as perfect as if she were blowing a smoke-ring.

'Ohh! Why's we on the floor, Alan?'

'Don't you remember? In the night?'

She frowned again and then her lips began to tremble.

'Ohh! . . . I was naughty in the night! I was naughty in the bed!'

'That's right. It was the chocolate. So I made *another* bed!'

'On the floor——' She patted the sheet delightedly, then paused.

'I remember the chocolate, but I've don't remember the new bed!' She began to cry. 'Mummy'll be cross!'

'Don't cry, Meg,' Alan told her, 'you'll make your eyes sticky again.'

'But what's we do?'

Alan sat on the floor beside her. It was quite true, Aunt Glad had been in a bad temper the day before.

'Shall we go into the garden?' he said. Meg stopped crying and nodded. She began to pull off her nightgown. As usual she forgot to undo the buttons. Alan had to come to the rescue. As he gradually eased the nightgown over her head the colour in her face was strained upwards so that the lower part was white. Then when the nightgown suddenly came away the blood rushed back making even the tip of her chin glow. The underside of her hair at the temples was lighter than the rest. Her breath came in little gasps. Alan kept his eye on her while she dressed so that she was in fact ready before he was. She waited, solemn and docile, while he readjusted his jersey which

in his haste he had put on back to front. Then he fastened the back of her dress and kneeling down did up the straps of her shoes. There were tiny golden hairs on her plump knees.

They tiptoed past Molly's bed. Molly's face without its make-up was soft and childish. It did not look much older, Alan thought, than Meg's; but the bare arm that lay across the counterpane, turned outwards, the hand slightly open, was like a grown woman's. There was a battered tin trunk at the side of her bed draped with a crocheted cloth. On top of this was arranged a powder-jar of pink glass, a powder-puff, a hand-mirror with a celluloid back, a bottle of yellow scent, and several small dishes containing pins, curlers and other odds and ends. On the wall above Molly's bed were pinned photographs, cut from magazines, of the film-star who was, she insisted, the 'living image' of Victor, her boy friend. Patches on the green distemper showed where other film-stars before the advent of Victor had lorded it over her dreams. Victor's own photograph was under her pillow: Alan could see the corner of the rexine frame which she had obtained at cost price from the Universal Stores where she worked.

Alan opened the door, carefully steering it over a worn patch of linoleum. They stepped out on to the landing. Alan held out his hand. Meg's flew to enter it. Occasionally he teased her by snatching his hand away at the last moment and moving it about: hers would follow after like a baby's lips reaching for the nipple. When she failed to catch his hand she would look up at him a frown creasing the tip of her nose, until he allowed her with a little grunt to place her warm, round fingers in his palm.

They stood for a moment on the landing, listening intently. It was easy to hear the creaky breathing of their grandmother who slept in the attic immediately above their heads. Moreover she was muttering to herself: she was always the first of the

adults to get up and for some time before she did so she carried on debate with the spirit of sleep. Apart from this most people would have agreed that the stillness was as absolute as if the sleepers were buried under snow. But Alan's and Meg's ears were like those of bats and they could hear – or at any rate sense – the breathing of their respective parents, in four distinct rhythms, two proceeding from the front bedroom where Alan's mother and father slept and two from Meg's parents in the 'middle' bedroom.

The landing and staircase were dark but they knew every inch of the way. Meg held on to the rails until she was able to reach the banisters: she lowered herself one step at a time. Alan's hand slid along a slippery trail on the wallpaper which he himself had worn. There were similar bands above and below: the highest was the tide-mark left by Molly as she was washed forward to the status of an upright carriage, hands resolutely at her side as she scorned further support from wall or banister.

The slidings had made little difference to the appearance of the wallpaper which was thick and embossed and an indeterminate chocolate colour, apart from imparting a further varnish. At the bottom of the stairs they turned left along the passage and into the kitchen. The morning sunshine showed up the uneven red tiles, crumbled into hollows where the women stood to do the cooking or washing-up, the blackened ceiling, the flaking colour-wash through which the uneven bricks protruded, the stone sink in one corner with its ancient brass tap which dripped constantly, the rusty old range and the decrepit gas cooker. It shed an ironical light too on the attempts that had been made by the womenfolk to improve matters – the piece of enamel behind the stove now more leprous than the wall it was meant to protect, the red check American cloth on the table, and the patterned paper on the shelves. These were in any case too high for the women to reach with comfort – a

defect which their husbands had been promising to remedy for years.

Alan stood on a chair to reach the bolt of the back door: the key had been lost long ago. The sound of the bolt disturbed Nipper, the old tom cat who slept on a box by the cooker. He made a startled noise that sounded like 'Prrrm!' He stood up and arched his back, moving his paws close to his belly as if he were treading down a very small mouse. Meg stroked the black band on his forehead. Her hand fitted comfortably between his ears. He began to give his 'rusty' purr – a rattling sound as if a nut had come adrift – which he reserved for early morning and which was very different from the steady throb of noonday. As Alan opened the door Nipper sniffed, decided it was too early to get up, uttered another 'Prrrm!' and curled up again on his box. His head was twisted round so that they could see his pale pink lips, stretched it seemed in a grin. Alan loved to see him curled up so extravagantly, in swirls of fawn and brown and black. The shape he described, from the nub of the head to the tapering tail, reminded him of a large mutton chop.

A creaking reached them from their grandmother's bed and they hurried out into the yard. It was paved with slate-blue stones, and was overshadowed by their own kitchen and out-houses on the right and by the Cowchers' fence on the left. Through a gap in the hedge they caught a glimpse of Mr Cowcher as he bent, knife in hand, over a rose bush. He was presumably on an early shift, for he was wearing his G.W.R. guard's uniform with its beautifully braided cap, and he was choosing a buttonhole that would be worthy of it. Mr Cowcher was famous for his buttonholes: neighbours ran to their windows to watch the portly figure hustling past, everything about him brushed and polished, including his cheeks which stood out as red and shining as snooker balls, and with a perfect bloom in the lapel of his coat. He had spread newspapers across the lawn in order to protect the polish of his boots though the

grass was so closely shaved and rolled that it could not possibly have reached above the soles. When he had found a bloom that satisfied him he began a backward retreat picking up the sheets of newspaper as he went. Alan and Meg waited until he had returned to his house before they advanced to the edge of the paving. 'There was a 'pop!' to their right and Meg jumped. 'It's only 'Tony,' Alan reminded her. This was the name they had given to the frog which waited for them every morning by the water-butt. He paused for a moment, pretending to ignore them, and then went ahead in leisurely hops, until in one big jump that stretched his back legs to their full extent so that he looked like a skinny mud-coloured baby he dived down the two steps and disappeared among the grass.

Alan and Meg followed. Alan's foot struck against something. He stooped down and picked up a bag of boiled sweets: he pocketed it without surprise. So Mr Cowcher *had* caught sight of them. He seldom spoke. There was a legend in Majuba Road that he disliked children, perhaps because he had none himself. He was proud of this reputation and maintained it as far as Alan and Meg were concerned by directing against them a medley of frowns, head-shakings, clickings, mutterings, and tut-tuttings. But he was forever giving them presents. He never delivered these personally. They simply appeared in their path as if by magic. It was not until he had hidden behind the water-butt one afternoon and had actually seen Mr Cowcher, after a scrutiny to left and right and an even more careful examination of neighbouring windows, lob a bag of aniseed balls over the top of the hedge that Alan had been convinced of the identity of the benefactor. He respected Mr Cowcher's concern for his reputation however and made no acknowledgments. As for Meg she still regarded these presents with awe as if they were manna from heaven.

As they stepped into the grass they exchanged a look of wonder: the garden – or rather their garden, for the phenome-

non for some reason did not extend to Mr Cowcher's – was covered with a ground mist. It made the few square yards look vast and mysterious: the grass was so long that there was scope for the mist to drift and roll: it might have been clouds veiling unknown peaks. It soaked through their shoes and socks as quickly as if they were made of brown paper. But they noticed no discomfort: whenever they came into the garden at this time of day they felt that they had left behind the old element and its limitations. The windows of the houses on either side were no longer inquisitive eyes but opaque and indifferent squares. They disengaged their hands. There was no need now of support given or received. They were in their own world and it was a world that was commensurate in every way to their needs and desires.

And it was Meg who was now the more purposeful. She ran ahead, her plump legs flashing. Alan caught up with her and together they pushed aside the springy branches and crawled through an opening like a rabbit's burrow to a gap at the back of the hedge where it adjoined the fencing of the Pooles' garden. The fencing here had almost disintegrated: it was the hedge that provided the real boundary. Its separate plants were so strong and firmly rooted that close to the ground they were like miniature tree trunks, their bark as delicately grained as the whorls on the pads of their thumbs. When they sat down the branches sprang to behind them: these too were covered with fine bark, so thin that the vivid green underside shone through the nutmeg brown.

It was quite dry in 'the den'. Even in wet weather it was only an occasional drop of rain that succeeded in forcing through the tracery of branches and leaves to explode like a small bomb on their noses or to be mopped up by hair or clothing. The ground, broken and sifted by the roots of the hedge, was carpeted with powdery leaves and innumerable fragments of twig, as fragile as herrings' bones.

Completely hidden from view they listened to the creakings and rustlings around them. These were known and therefore harmless, whereas in the world outside perils might lurk in the most familiar sounds that now began to reach them – the whirring of alarm clocks, the rush of water into kettles, and all the grunts and coughs and mutterings of early morning. Greg's bugle (now that the neighbourhood was beginning to stir he ventured a few apologetic bleats) belonged to yet another category of sounds. So too did the yells and shrieks that he emitted from time to time. They laughed at the terror which these inspired in children visiting Majuba Road for the first time: Greg was big enough to be classed among adults but he belonged neither to their world nor to their own, and they respected his isolation.

After a while Meg exclaimed petulantly: 'Hungry!' Alan produced the bag of sweets. She shook her head. 'I'se *food* hungry' she said. Alan took one of the sweets for himself. Part of the bag came away with it, but he liked the feel of the rough paper against his tongue. He crawled out of the den. He looked round him cautiously. The sun was shining strongly now. As the ground mist folded away he smelt the grass: it was a blend of scents, a separate one emanating from each layer: hot and sweet at the top where it was already dry, like curdled milk in the middle and dank and earthy near the roots.

He hurried over to the raspberry canes. Here the grass thinned out: the strands that wrapped themselves round the bottoms of the canes were like rotten thread. Drops of dew as big as the glass 'pob alleys' they used in their games of marbles clung to them. The canes were pale green just above the grass-line but freckled with scarlet. Higher up they were covered with a reddish brown fur as if caterpillars were crawling up them; but this could scratch the legs like teasle brushes. At this time of day he could gather the fruit, which he put in his handkerchief, without fear of the 'raspberry bites'. When it was hotter tiny insects would attack their arms and legs: the sharp, acid

bites were like the taste of the raspberries themselves. He and Meg had never actually seen these insects: they had come to the conclusion that at certain times of the day the sun endowed the red specks on the canes with a life of their own.

When he had filled the handkerchief he knotted the corners and returned to the den. Meg was sucking her thumb to ease the pangs of hunger. Her upper lip was damp and there was a streak of dirt across it. He untied the handkerchief and tipped a portion of the raspberries into the palm of his hand. He put them one after the other into Meg's mouth. He knew how long she took to consume each. The inside of her lower lip was moist and warm. When she took the last berry she held the tips of his fingers in her mouth a few seconds longer. This was a sign that she was feeling drowsy and a few minutes later she was leaning against him fast asleep. Alan herded together with the tip of his tongue the bits of paper that had been stuck to the sweet, formed them into a pellet and spat. He ate the remainder of the raspberries. He dried his fingers on the handkerchief. It was no use attempting to wipe his mouth: the juice of the raspberries soaked into the corners like floor-stain. Then he too fell asleep, one cheek resting on his arm. Even while he was in this position Meg managed to burrow her head against his collar-bone.

'Now then you two!' They opened their eyes. Molly had parted the branches and was looking down at them. They returned her gaze. Alan warily, Meg with eyes as round as those of a lemur. Molly adopted her severe grown-up look and her sister's lip trembled. A little smile of satisfaction touched Molly's lips: it was succeeded by a look of concern.

'It's all right!' she said. 'I've made the bed and cleaned up. Mum doesn't know about it. But you *are* a naughty little puppy, aren't you?'

Reassured they crawled out. Molly looked severe again, straightened Meg's clothes and brushed off the fragments of

leaf and twig. 'There, you'll do!' she said and snatched her up in her arms. Meg submitted passively. Her face turned sideways, the cheek and mouth pursed up where she was pressed against Molly's breast, she regarded Alan enigmatically out of one eye. When her sister suddenly released her she dropped through her arms and caught hold of Alan's jersey to steady herself.

'Come along!' Molly said. 'They've started breakfast. There's been a letter from Uncle Hector – and they're talking nineteen to the dozen. But they're bound to notice you aren't there in a minute.'

'How's *you* know where we was?' Meg demanded, planting her legs apart and staring truculently up at her sister.

'Silly! Don't I know all about our den?'

'My's and Alan's den!'

'But who *showed* it you?'

'My's and Alan's!' Meg's face turned scarlet. She stamped her foot.

'It was mine first!' Molly replied haughtily.

'Wasn't!'

'Was!'

'Wasn't!'

'I tell you it was!'

'Wasn't!'

Molly turned to Alan.

'Tell the silly,' she appealed. 'Didn't I show it to you?'

Alan looked at her doubtfully. A moment before when she was wearing her grown-up expression he would have dismissed the idea that she had ever had anything to do with the den. Now that she was facing her sister with cheeks every bit as inflamed it seemed more likely. He glanced at Meg and replied diplomatically: 'It's mine and Meg's *now*!' Meg nodded her head vigorously. Molly, aghast at her momentary abandonment of the standards expected of a fifteen-year-old turned aside with

affected indifference. 'Oh, have it your own way!' she said.

'Alan's and Meg's,' her sister announced with satisfaction. They followed Molly down the garden. When she reached the beginning of the paved yard she stopped and reached up to one of the hollyhocks that grew along the wooden fence by the water-closet. She just managed to tease the petals of the topmost blossom. It moved as if jerking its head away. The soft pinkness of the petals matched Molly's finger-tips. The stretching movement made the outlines of her breasts disappear. Then she lowered her arm, rubbed her hands over her hips and straightened her hair. She tilted her head to one side, lowered her eyelashes and holding her arms at her sides a few inches from her body, the hands turned outwards, turned slowly on heel and toe.

'Well?' she said, 'how do I look?'

'You've got grown-up things!' Meg said.

Molly looked crestfallen.

'It's your *best* clothes!' Alan corrected.

Molly darted him a look, part haughty, part grateful. She stretched out her arms, then wrapped them round her shoulders and hugged herself. 'Going out with Victor tonight!' she said.

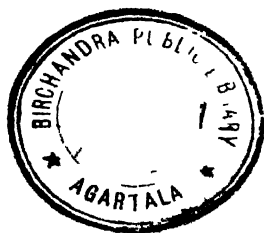
She was wearing a tight-fitting black skirt and a pink glossy blouse. Her hair was darker than Meg's but like it in texture. She had tried to discipline it by the use of shampoos and curling irons, but she had merely succeeded in making it look frizzy instead of woolly. Her lisle stockings were left over from her school days, but she was wearing the high-heeled shoes which had been her first purchase with her own money and which were her most prized possession. She was using make-up. This was normally allowed only on special occasions, such as the staff party at the Universal Stores, but she was presumably gambling on her mother overlooking it in the distractions of breakfast and the arrival of Uncle Hector's letter. But she had no idea how to apply her make-up. The powder she was using was like cornflour: it had left white streaks on her rather long

cheeks. She had been working overtime and the powder showed a bluish colour round her eyes, emphasising their tiredness and making them look as if she had been weeping. Round her mouth it clung in separate grains on the fair down. Her lipstick was bright red: it made her lips, which were slightly parted, stand out as if they had been stung by a bee. The scarlet blob of her mouth against the white powder gave her face an open unprotected look. Alan felt an inexplicable pang. She felt his eyes on her and darted a quick glance at him. It was a moment of secret communion that transcended the differences of age and sex. But a moment later she turned to him. 'Now then!' she said briskly, 'one more look' She straightened the collar of his jersey. Then she moistened the edge of her handkerchief and removed the raspberry stains from his mouth, as if to remind him that the barriers were lowered once more. 'You'll do!' she said. 'Come on! Time for breakfast!'

The back bedroom window of the Travers' house opened again. Greg thrust out his head. 'Oh me nerves!' he bawled and slammed the window to again. Molly stopped with a jerk, pretending to be shocked. Alan and Meg laughed.

'It's only Greg!' they cried

Molly tossed her head. 'H'nat a neighbourhood!' she said.



CHAPTER TWO

Alan and Meg sat on the floor in the corner of the middle room, wedged in between the wall and the bamboo table. The legs of furniture and of human beings surrounded them. They sat with their knees touching their chins. Meg's shorter legs rested against the hollows of Alan's thighs. She had grazed one of her knees. The tightness of the skin over the knee-cap caused minute drops of blood to emerge as through a fine rose. Alan dabbed the place with the ball of his thumb. The dust adhering to it was sufficient to stop the bleeding. Meg gazed at it, rubbed it and laughed.

No one paid any attention. Occasionally attempts were made to divert them from their hide-out in case they heard something 'unfit for young ears', but when once they had reached it they were quickly forgotten. In any case their position down here among legs and feet gave them a special focus upon the adult world. Just as in the garden when they lay in the long grass they were aware of the sounds, scents and even tastes of the insects that inhabited it without being able to put a name to a single one, so here they sensed all that was happening but could have given no coherent account of it. In some way they 'knew' more than the grown-ups themselves, but it was a knowledge that did not belong to conscious thought or vocabulary. It was sights and sounds, colours and smells, meaningful glances and intonations of voices that communicated with them. Prohibition or dissimulation had little power against these. Indeed if the adults had only realised it, it was when they imagined they were practising reticence that they most thoroughly gave themselves away.

The 'middle room', which was occupied by Meg's parents, was smaller than the one in the front of the house and, lacking a bay window, less imposing. But it was the real centre of gravity. It was here that both families congregated whenever anything of importance was happening. Friends too knew of this arrangement and the intimates of Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest did not need permission to enter the house. A sharp rattle on the front-door knocker was sufficient. In this way they could proceed straight along the passage, by-passing the front room. There were various reasons for this tactic. In the first place it was a recognition of the fact that Alan's father was the official tenant and therefore entitled to an additional degree of privacy. In the second place everybody knew that a front room was a place apart: in cases where a single family was in occupation it was indeed a shrine or chapel into which no one ventured except on Sundays and Bank Holidays. But in addition it owed something to the characters of Alan's parents who were shy and retiring. Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest, on the contrary, were very sociable: they laughed and talked and shouted a good deal and quite often they quarrelled.

Aunt Glad was a complete contrast to her brother. She had frizzy black hair and flashing dark eyes, whereas he was fair with mild blue eyes behind pince-nez and an amiable expression accentuated by slight deafness. When he couldn't catch what was being said he leaned forward murmuring: 'Eh? Eh?' with an apologetic laugh. She on the other hand was quick and vivid – 'like a gipsy' Alan's mother sometimes said, pursing her lips disapprovingly.

Uncle Ernest was a small man with high cheek-bones and a leathery complexion, thin chestnut-coloured hair and bow legs, the result, he declared, of spending so much of his life in the saddle. 'I could ride before I could walk,' he used to say. He worked for his father who owned 'The Town and County Riding School', an establishment which had been in the family

for generations. He always wore riding breeches. When he came home from work, smelling of the stables, he changed into another pair. The children had never seen him in trousers. Even the wedding photograph that stood on top of the bamboo table showed him in riding breeches, though they were obviously a special pair with edges as sharp as knives, and the leggings below them, even in photogravure, shone like mahogany. It did not strike them as incongruous that he was also wearing a black coat with a carnation in the buttonhole, or that Aunt Glad next to him was in traditional wedding finery.

Alan and Meg suspected that it was the breeches that provoked the impish element in Aunt Glad. She was always teasing him about them. Sometimes when they were quarrelling, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all, she would snatch up a darning-needle from her sewing-machine and thrust it into the expanse of buff-coloured twill, uttering peals of high-pitched laughter.

'Glad, Glad - *don't!*' he would expostulate, his face screwed up. She would dart at him again, and they would fight for possession of the needle while scraps of cloth and tins of buttons cascaded from the sewing-machine. On one occasion, when she had managed to drive the needle in farther than usual, Uncle Ernest let out a yell and boxed her ears. She stared at him, her mouth open.

'Ernie, Ernie! You *hit* me!' she wailed. He patted her shoulder. 'There! There!' he said. 'Don't take on. But I'm always telling you - *don't!*'

Alan's mother disapproved of these 'antics', which she considered vulgar - although needless to say they had no relation to those that took place among the dreadful Traverses. She was not always on good terms with her sister-in-law. When this happened they reacted in very different ways. Aunt Glad stalked about muttering and charged up and down the stairs so that in spite of her small size the whole house shuddered. If

she encountered her sister-in-law she stood and stared at her with flashing eyes, arms akimbo. *Her* main effort, on the other hand, was devoted to avoiding these encounters, and sometimes she managed to do so for several days at a time. This called for miracles of ingenuity, as the families shared the same kitchen. It involved taking meals at peculiar times and sorries for fish and chips or faggots and peas. As soon as she heard her sister-in-law leave the house she turned the key in the front door and threw herself into a frenzy of housework. When she heard Aunt Glad rattling the door-knob on her return she dashed back to the front room and shut herself in, sending Alan or Meg to unlock the door – the vendettas never extended to the children who regarded them philosophically.

Sallies of a more delicate nature were sometimes called for. Alan would see his mother tiptoe to the door, frowning at him to keep quiet; then suddenly she would fling it open, run along the passage with remarkable speed (she was rather a heavy woman), dash into the kitchen, light the gas under pot or pan, and be back again in her own room before Aunt Glad had had time to emerge – repeating the two-way journey a few minutes later. It was these dashes, depending as they did on split-second timing, that afforded her particular pleasure. She knew they goaded her sister-in-law, and at the end of each successful sortie she stood at the door of her room grimacing and giggling, straining her ears to catch the frustrated mutterings, bangings and stampings that came from the next room.

It was difficult to avoid meetings altogether, and when she did have to face her sister-in-law her pale, rather heavy face, surmounted by its sleek blonde hair; assumed a meek, long-suffering expression which infuriated Aunt Glad almost as much as the evasions and disappearances. But their disagreements seldom lasted for more than three or four days and usually ended in each others' arms in an outburst of weeping. This always took place on the top step of the staircase where

it turned into the landing. Aunt Glad wept noisily, brandishing a handkerchief and splashing her tears about like a bird in a bath: Alan's mother, without a sound, her big eyes filling and overflowing like cisterns.

There were occasions when Alan's mother decided to withdraw her whole family to the front room. This was to register her disapproval of the 'antics' and she described the process as 'keeping ourselves to ourselves'. It was one that fulfilled an important function in Number Twenty Majuba Road. No one could live for ever at the pitch demanded by Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest. Even their children were glad every now and then to retreat to the front room. Molly sometimes took Victor there for tea. Her aunt's cups and saucers matched: there were crocheted cloths and doilies and home-made cakes. Aunt Glad's house-keeping was a hit-and-miss affair. If she was short of saucers she made do with plates or even the lids of cocoa tins. As for cooking she scoffed at 'anything elaborate'. As a rule she bought her cakes though from time to time she turned to 'ready-mix' preparations, advocating each new one with the enthusiasm of a collector. Her family groaned on these occasions: the sponges and cakes that emerged were highly coloured and tasted, they swore, of soap. Once Uncle Ernest had been discovered throwing the latest packet in the dustbin.

Alan and Meg enjoyed the front room for a change. The green curtains and cushions, the linoleum with its sprays of flowers imparted something of the cool, tank-like atmosphere of the garden. Alan's mother would show them her photograph album, or her collections of foreign postcards and curios – she had several brothers on service overseas – or read to them or tell them romantic adventure stories. In the middle room it was never possible to sit still long enough for activities of this kind.

Sometimes they would be allowed to examine a miniature writing-cabinet, which Alan's mother counted as her most prized possession. This aroused the participation of their grand-

mother – who also used the front room as an oasis. The writing-cabinet had belonged to her favourite daughter Cora who had died of tuberculosis and upon whom she had, according to the rest of the family, ‘doted to excess’.

She had lived with this daughter for some years and nursed her through her last illness. Aunt Cora had been married to Uncle Hector, who had once been a skipper on the Fishguard–Rosslare route and who was now in the Army Inland Transport Service and – awesome thought – an officer. He had rented a house in Winthrop Avenue, a thoroughfare which Alan’s mother described as ‘*really* select’, and had maintained his invalid wife and his mother-in-law in what seemed to the rest of the family a very fine style indeed. So much so that, although after his wife’s death Uncle Hector had sold the house in Winthrop Avenue and disappeared so that his mother-in-law had been forced to come to Majuba Road, she was still treated by the neighbours with the respect owing to one who had belonged to a higher sphere.

Alan and Meg had vivid memories of their visits to Aunt Cora’s sick-room. It was very close and the smells of flowers, fruit and medicines blended in an exciting way. The invalid was a pretty fluffy-haired woman: she wore a pink bed-jacket. Her cheeks were so hot that they burned their lips when they kissed her. She never kissed them in return; averting her face at the last moment because, their parents informed them, of the danger of infection. But she used to hug them to her convulsively. They submitted but they did not like her bony chest which was moist and smelt of perspiration. They were glad when she released them and allowed them to slide off the bed, which struck them as monstrously big for her sparrow-like body.

She would then despatch them for the writing-cabinet which was kept on top of the bureau by the window. If it was Meg’s turn to carry it Alan would walk beside her, his hands underneath hers taking most of the weight. They would deposit it

on the bed and Aunt Cora would take a key from beneath her pillow and insert it in the lock. Her fingers shook as she did so. They were long and very thin, a bluish white in colour, like candles: she wore a number of rings and Alan had noticed once when she held his hand that these were unusually cold and hard to the touch as if they had an existence apart from the fragile knuckles to which they were attached. The writing-cabinet was made of walnut wood, beautifully polished and inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory. When the lid was raised it disclosed a lining of shot-silk of a shade impossible to define – a blend of rose, lilac and lavender. It was honeycombed with all kinds of recesses, drawers, trays and flaps, and contained, their aunt informed them, a 'secret compartment' in which she kept a photograph of her husband and a packet of his love letters.

In one of the drawers there were usually lead soldiers, miniature dolls or feeding bottles and other small toys. When she had dispensed these Aunt Cora would hand the cabinet back to the children and they would carry it to its place on the bureau. Then they would sit on the floor to play with the toys. They enjoyed the unfamiliar sensation of a carpet against their legs. For one thing it allowed of greater mobility: with the linoleum at home it was necessary to stay in the same spot for several minutes at a time in order to achieve a comfortable warmth. But they were never really at ease because all the time they were conscious of Aunt Cora's scrutiny. Even when she lay back on her pillow her glittering eyes followed their every movement. They were relieved when Alan's mother offered to read to her. She was a favourite of Aunt Cora who preferred her company to that of her voluble and excitable sister. With her own relations she was tearful and fractious. With her sister-in-law she was remarkably docile. She did not even complain when one day after a particularly violent bout of coughing she said to her – in the whisper which she imagined was inaudible: 'I don't think the children had better come again.' When they left the

room Aunt Cora was lying on her back. Her big eyes looked at them and she smiled faintly. As they closed the door they heard her murmur: 'I want *you* to have the writing-cabinet, Lil. But you'll let *them* look at it, won't you?'

It was no easy matter to stay in the front room of Number Twenty Majuba Road when anything untoward was happening next door. A moment would arrive when everybody suddenly became aware of a concentration of energy behind the wall, like a dynamo renewing itself or a hive about to swarm. There would be whisperings, gigglings, murmurs of conversation, bursts of laughter. Alan's mother would begin to falter in her readings and the children's attention would wander. They would fix their eyes on the wall as if they expected to see it grow red-hot and melt away. Just at the moment when the excitement was gathering momentum there would be a breathless rat-tat-tat, the front door would be flung open and a friend or relative or neighbour – and often a whole procession of them – would come bustling down the passage slipping on the polished linoleum in their impatience and burst into the middle room. Their voices would rise like flocks of starlings and soon they would be shouting at the tops of their voices – nobody ever talked at a normal pitch in the middle room.

If Molly and Victor were visiting their aunt it was at this point that they would mutter some apology and withdraw, slowly and with dignity at first, as befitted two people 'walking out', but with a scampering of feet as soon as they were outside the door. A minute or so later their grandmother would also rise to her feet, sigh with feigned indifference and say: 'I *suppose* I'd better go and keep an eye on things!' Meanwhile Alan and Meg seated side by side on the sofa would begin to wriggle, while Alan's mother would continue her reading with increased deliberation. A moment later her husband would lift his head from his newspaper and say: 'How about dropping in on Glad?' – as if she lived several streets away. His wife would

trown and go on with her reading, but now the mistakes would be more frequent and a little later she would fall silent, pretending to read to herself. Suddenly she would lay down her book, rise from her chair and stand under the gas-bracket with her hand poised on the chain. This was the signal the others had been awaiting. Alan's father would throw his paper aside and jump to his feet. His face would take on an eager boyish look, while, in spite of her efforts to appear calm and slightly disapproving, colour would touch his wife's neck and cheeks. As for Alan and Meg they would be out of the door as soon as it was ajar, and into the middle room, gliding as quickly as shadows and often as little noticed to their cyrie by the bamboo table. If the room was particularly crowded they would drop on hands and knees and disappear under the big table, making their way by a devious underground route, past legs of flesh and wood, encountering perhaps an occasional absent-minded pat.

Tonight, however, they were obliged to run the gauntlet of the assembled company. This happened when the grown-ups were in a particularly expansive mood, or when Uncle Ernest had backed a winner or pulled off a successful deal at the horse auction and had in consequence brought home a cask of cider. This more leisurely progress to their corner had its compensations. There was no knowing, for one thing, who might be there. It might only be members of the family or neighbours, but it might be complete strangers. Above all there was always the romantic possibility of a long-lost relative from distant parts. And what is more there often *was*. The war had only been over for two years and demobilisation was by no means complete: in addition there were regular soldiers and sailors, not to mention emigrants and adventurers, on both sides of the family, and it was to the middle room that forgotten relations re-visiting the home-town or on leave or *en route* for another ship, inevitably made their way. Nothing could be more exciting than to make the rounds of the middle room at such times, to

be kissed and embraced by unfamiliar lips and hands, to play with unfamiliar watch-chains or necklaces (for the newcomers often brought wives or daughters), or to have coins pressed into their hands, still warm from their owners as if they themselves had just minted them. No two pairs of hands were the same in texture, pressure, scent or temperature, no two cheeks and no two pairs of lips. Every beard and moustache was a thicket of new sensations: every dress revealed new patterns and colorations and new and unexpected configurations of flesh and bone – crooks of elbows, pits of arms, curves of necks and clefts of bosoms. After a few minutes these impressions blurred into one continuous whole. As they were handed round from one to the other they lost their awareness of separate identities. They felt as if they had been taken into the warm, mysterious embrace of the whole adult world and as if that world were some vast composite body, male and female combined, over which they were allowed to wander among a variety of delicious sensations.

Nevertheless the atmosphere tended to be intoxicating. Tonight for example, they were glad to reach their corner and to sink down out of sight. They fell into a doze, as they often did, waking a few minutes later to a murmur like that of warm Pacific waves. As if through a periscope they looked out at their parents and grandmother, Great-uncle Charlie, their grandmother's elder brother who lived at the other end of the town, Mrs Blount, who lived at the top of the road and who was Aunt Glad's special crony, and 'the cousin from Canada'. The last-named had been one of the surprise visitors three weeks ago. Since then he had attended the gatherings in the middle room regularly, usually in company with Great-uncle Charlie near whom he was lodging. He never took off his coat and always sat with his hat on his knees as if he might be returning to Canada any moment. He was very quiet and was usually forgotten until suddenly, to everybody's surprise, he would come

out with some comment that showed he had been following the proceedings with the greatest attention. No one has succeeded in establishing the exact degree of his relationship, except that it was by marriage. It turned out after a time that his main purpose in visiting his presumptive relations was to borrow money. Uncle Ernest and Aunt Glad had encouraged him because *they* hoped to borrow money from *him*.

But although all these faces were familiar, Alan and Meg looked out from their place of concealment with eager eyes. It was impossible to present a blank face in the middle room – even the cousin from Canada could not control a twitching of his long nose. Nearly everybody had the air of having rushed in in order to impart some momentous piece of news. It might be the smallest of small beer, but attendance in the middle room conferred upon it a sense of mystery and drama. Particularly, too, at this hour of a summer evening when the gas was lit but the curtains still undrawn, so that the smoky red sky that softened alike the rows of hollyhocks in the garden and the factory chimneys indenting the skyline above the back streets was reflected in the mirror above the mantelpiece and in the glass of the pictures on the walls – imparting to the Highland scenes a degree of realism which would have astonished their artists, and which often caused Alan and Meg to jump, convinced that the shaggy steers had raised their heads from the crimson pools where they were drinking and that they were staring at them with fiery eyes.

Tonight there was a real piece of news, the letter that had arrived from Uncle Hector. It was the first he had written since his wife's funeral a year ago. This, apparently, was a serious dereliction of duty. Aunt Glad was vehement in her indignation.

'To think, after all the *fuss* he used to make! Why, to hear him talk he would have gone through fire and water for us!'

'Smoke without fire,' Alan's mother observed shaking her head sorrowfully.

'Yes, but what I can't get over is the way he went off after the funeral with hardly a word of good-bye. And then getting the agents to sell the house in Winthrop Avenue, leaving Mam here without a roof over her head!'

'She was very welcome here,' Alan's father interrupted.

'I know I was, my boy,' his mother said, patting his arm, 'but when I think of all I did for Hector. . . .' Her voice trembled. She took out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. Her relations crowded round her.

'There, there, Mother,' Alan's father murmured, laying his hand on her shoulder.

'Oh, don't cry, Mam!' his wife wailed, nearly breaking into tears herself.

'He's not worth it! He's not worth it!' Aunt Glad kept exclaiming.

Her mother regained her composure and waved them away. She straightened her back and folded her hands in her lap.

'You see,' she said, turning to Mrs Blount and the cousin from Canada, and speaking in a dignified voice, 'Hector, Cora and I were close, very close. . . .'

'And now he says he's coming to visit us,' Alan's mother resumed after a pause.

'I'll believe it when I see it!' Aunt Glad cried.

Her mother shook her head. 'I don't know *what* to believe.'

Alan observed that none of them suggested that Uncle Hector should be refused admission if he did arrive. He had noticed before that absent relations were often criticised and then welcomed with open arms. He had accepted the duplicity as an inevitable concomitant of the adult world. His grandmother, once more in control of herself, shook her head and pursed her lips, a movement which produced a network of wrinkles like pen strokes at the corners of her mouth:

'Let's hope he shows a proper respect for the dead.' She uttered these words in a grim almost threatening tone of voice.

as if she was determined to exact from her son-in-law a devotion to his wife in death that he had never shown in life. She seemed to consider the present situation more fraught with obligations than the previous one. Alan found it very puzzling.

He was puzzled too to see that his father glanced uneasily both at his mother and at his wife whenever Uncle Hector's name was mentioned, and that Uncle Ernest looked at Aunt Glad with a similar expression. The younger women, on the other hand, were clearly thrown into a state of pleasurable anticipation. Aunt Glad's eyes, in spite of her earlier strictures, snapped with excitement and she tossed her head so that the frizzy black hair fell over her forehead, while Alan's mother performed a curious preening movement, drawing in her chin and arching the back of her neck. But the biggest surprise of all was to see the elegant Mrs Blount in such a state of agitation.

She was a tall rather thin woman with a pale skin. She was wearing an oatmeal-coloured dress with a low 'V' neck on which lay a string of large amber beads, almost identical in colour to her eyebrows and the coils of auburn hair piled on top of her head like a tea-cosy. Every time she heard Uncle Hector's name a flush rose in this V-shaped expanse of neck, fascinating Alan because that too assumed an auburn tint, and because it never reached as far as her face, which was insulated by the layers of powder. It was she who was most insistent on returning to the subject.

'When did you say your brother-in-law was coming?' she would say, affecting an air of idle curiosity. Or, a few minutes later, 'I think you said your brother-in-law would be here for at least a month?' And then again: 'Let me see, your brother-in-law is a *captain*, isn't he?' And every time she made these inquiries the flush started up in her neck.

After a while Alan found himself reacting to the excitement of the women. From the conversation he gathered that he and Meg must have seen Uncle Hector on a number of occasions.

It was obvious from Meg's expression that she had not the slightest recollection of doing so. In his own mind a dim memory had begun to form: it had nothing to do with a recognisable face or form: it was associated rather with a special quality of texture and smell. But, once aroused, it excited his senses and filled him with a vague feeling of uneasiness.

Gradually a second topic of conversation, introduced by fits and starts alongside the discussion of Uncle Hector, gained precedence. This concerned Firefly, a black mare which Uncle Ernest and the Guv'nor (as his father was known), had recently acquired. The members of the family had heard the story before but Uncle Ernest – perhaps, it occurred to Alan, in order to divert attention from Uncle Hector – was anxious to retail it for the benefit of the visitors.

'Go on!' Aunt Glad prompted him. 'Tell them how you put it over on the Remount Depot.'

At this point, as had happened on previous occasions, Alan's mother frowned and compressed her lips, and his father darted a sidelong glance at her and gave his apologetic laugh. Alan knew from these signs that there must be something disreputable about the story, though his parents listened as eagerly as everybody else. Alan had no idea of the precise significance of the words 'Remount Depot', apart from the fact that they had something to do with horses. They belonged to a whole category of phrases that were endowed with a talismanic power. There was for example the 'call up' which had taken his father away at a time when he was an even mistier figure than Uncle Hector. Associated with it were the two sibilant and strangely potent words 'armistice' and 'demobilisation' which, just as mysteriously, had brought his father back. Of this event he had a much clearer recollection: in fact he had not yet got over the surprise and his father still seemed half a stranger. But none of these phrases affected Uncle Ernest and apparently it was 'Remount Depot' that was responsible. The phrase had recently

acquired further shades of significance: he had overheard references to the 'disbanding' of the Remount Depot, and this apparently was of the utmost importance to the Guv'nor and his family.

'No onc knows a good bit of horse-flesh like Ernie,' Aunt Glad said. She knew little about horses herself but she adopted a swaggering air when she was speaking of them and larded her conversation with such phrases as 'a nice bit of horse-flesh' which made Uncle Ernest laugh in spite of the threat of the the darning-needle.

'He can even tell how old they are,' she said. 'He looks at their teeth and feels their legs.'

'Is our Glad speaking of the mare?' Great-uncle Charlie, who was the family wag, interrupted in his fruity voice. During the laughter, Alan's mother and Mrs Blount exchanged glances as if to assure each other that they both appreciated that the jest had been not quite nice.

'It was last Tuesday fortnight,' Aunt Glad went on when the laughter had subsided, blushing and giggling at Great-uncle Charlie. 'No! It was a Monday--I remember it was washing-day. . . .' She remembered too it was her husband who was supposed to be telling the story. 'Go on, silly!' she said, prodding him with her forefinger. Everybody waited patiently until Uncle Ernest--who had been holding his mouth at the ready--judged it was safe for him to take over.

'Yes, I could ride before I could walk!' he began. He used this preamble to almost every story he told. 'That's how we were all brought up,' he continued, spreading out his knees as if making way for an imaginary mount. 'Whatever I know about horses I learned from my old dad. There isn't much the Guv'nor doesn't know about horses I can tell you!'

There was a murmur of assent. The Guv'nor was famous throughout the West Country for his knowledge of horses, particularly their ailments, and for his astuteness (there were

some who called it 'sharp practice') in buying and selling them.

'Well, as you know,' Uncle Ernest went on, 'the Remount Depot have done a lot of business with the Guv'nor – he's got some sort of contract, though don't ask me for the ins and outs of it – the Guv'nor's a law to himself . . . to tell you the truth the Remount eats out of his hand. . . .' There was another murmur of agreement. This time it contained an undertone of embarrassment: it was well known that the Guv'nor had managed to obtain exemption from military service for both his sons, on the ground that they were indispensable to him in his work for the Remount Depot. Alan's father, as one who had 'done his bit', sat upright and tried to look patriotic, and then blushed and looked round him smiling apologetically.

'As soon as the Guv'nor saw Firefly,' Uncle Ernest went on, 'you can bet he pricked up his ears! "Ernie, me boy," he said, "I don't know how she comes to be here, or where they got her from – but ain't it a pity she's got to stay here among all these rough soldiers?" and he gave me one of his winks. Just then Captain Coram came in. *He* doesn't know one end of a horse from another. He caught a packet in the war. . . .' Uncle Ernest turned to his brother and added respectfully: 'at Wipers.' Alan's father nodded with the air of an old campaigner: he had received a wound at Ypres himself. 'So they gave him a cushy job at the Remount,' Uncle Ernest explained. 'Well, quick as a flash I bent down and began looking at a cut I'd spotted on Firefly's left foreleg. I pretended to be examining it very careful like, but I took good care to rub it and pinch it a bit and – well, you know how touchy Firefly is. She began to lash out. The captain had to look lively! You wouldn't have thought he would have been so spry with that gammy leg. "Well, what is it, my man?" he said, when he'd got a safe distance. "Pray tell me what is the mattah!"' There was a burst of laughter. Uncle Ernest was said to be very good at 'taking off the gentry', though Alan's mother, who had romantic notions about them, looked

her most disapproving on these occasions.

'Well, I shook my head and looked worried.' And Uncle Ernest screwed up his little monkey face into a lugubrious expression. Aunt Glad led a fresh burst of laughter. All the time her husband was speaking she kept her eyes fastened on him and held her mouth open in order to lead the laughter at the slightest opportunity.

"I don't like the look of this, sir," I said. "*I do not like it.*" "What! What! What!" Captain Coram said, "What is it? Out with it, my man!" and he stopped down and had a quick look at the place on Firefly's leg which by now I'd managed to tease up quite a bit. Of course he didn't like to admit that he was too scared to take a proper look – not that he would have been much the wiser. "H'm," he said, pulling at his moustache, "h'm," and tried to look knowing. "Can I be of any assistance, Captain Coram?" the Guv'nor said – you know how lad-di-da the Guv'nor can be when he likes.' There was a moment's silence as they contemplated their several mental pictures of the Guv'nor. In Alan's mind he appeared as a grim and imposing figure. He was tall and spare, with a long, pale face and a bony skull covered with silver-grey hair. He wore old-fashioned riding kit of impeccable cut, with a stock at the neck, and he carried an amber-headed riding switch. His expression was distant: he had pale blue eyes, or rather a single eye, for he had lost the other in a shooting accident and the glass substitute imparted an additional frosty glitter to his stare. When he wished he could speak in a cultured manner – as could his daughters Hetty and Doris – whereas his sons nearly always spoke broad West Country, except when they were aiming at satirical effect. 'A riding master of the old school,' people in Cranwyck used to say, 'but the sons are only grooms.'

"What is *your* opinion, Turner?" Uncle Ernest resumed his recital, again imitating Captain Coram. 'The Guv'nor gave him his crop to hold – cool as you like – and bent down. "It's

an ulcer," he said. "Bad?" said Captain Coram. The Guv'nor gave him one of his long looks and said nothing for a bit. The Captain watched him like a ferret at a rat-hole. "Very!" the Guv'nor barked, making the Captain nearly jump out of his skin. Then the Guv'nor looked at him, or rather right through him, gave him a nod and marched off. After a bit, Captain Coram turned to me. "Turner," he said, nice as pie this time – no "my man" about him now – "Turner, do you think the old man could be persuaded to have another look at her?" "I don't want that pompous ass – I mean I don't want Major Roper poking his nose in." You know, Major Roper is the Chief Veterinary Surgeon – though if you ask me, I'd say he knew less about horses than my Aunt Fanny. In any case, he's drunk nine cases out of ten when you want him. At the time, too, he was away on leave. "To tell you the truth, Turner," the Captain said, speaking very confidential, "I've taken rather a fancy to Firefly," and he gave me a nasty little wink. "Hullo!" I say to myself, "so *you're* up to another of your little games, are you?" – it's a disgrace the way some of these officers carry on – government property too! . . . Uncle Ernest paused to shake his head: his indignation was quite genuine. "Well, I turned to him," he continued. "Oh, I shouldn't do that if I were you, Captain Coram!" I said. "Why the hell not, my man?" "Well, sir, I know the Guv'nor. There's *nothing* he doesn't know about horses – and you saw the way he looked? Well, when he's got that look it's serious." "H'm, h'm . . ." Uncle Ernest tugged at an imaginary moustache. Aunt Glad looked delightedly at his audience: they tittered dutifully.

"Well, to cut a long story short, I promised I'd try to talk the Guv'nor round. And after a lot of palaver – the Guv'nor tut-tutting and shaking his head – he said he'd have another look at Firefly and see what he could do with her. *But would you believe it?* – Uncle Ernest enunciated each word carefully – "that nasty old leg ulcer got worse *and* worse *and* worse. Would – you

– believe – it?’

‘Good old Ern!’ Great-uncle Charlie interrupted, and everybody applauded. Alan’s father glanced at his wife to see how heartily he ought to laugh; she looked at Mrs Blount and checked herself in time to join her in a doubtful pursing of lips.

‘So one day,’ Uncle Ernest continued, ‘Captain Coram comes up to the Guv’nor. “Well, Turner, what do you think of her?” he says. “Captain Coram,” the Guv’nor replies in his grand manner, “I’ve tried everything. You know my reputation in this part of the country. . . .” “Oh, second to none, Turner! Second to none! The whole county knows you.” “Well, then, you can imagine how much it hurts me to have to admit it – but I *have* to say it – I can do nothing more.” “What! What!” cries the Captain, darting one of his sly looks at the Guv’nor. The Guv’nor looks him in the eye. “May I make a suggestion?” he says in that silky voice of his. “Yes, yes,” says the Captain. “Well,” says the Guv’nor, very quiet like, “I suggest you call in Major Roper.” “Whassat? Whassat?” he says. The Guv’nor stares at him out of his glass eye and the Captain goes as red as a beetroot. “I’ve got another suggestion,” the Guv’nor says a bit later. “H’mph!” says the Captain. “Let’s hear it then!” “Well, you could discharge Firefly,” the Guv’nor tells him. “There’s an auction next week over at Chaddenham – I could dispose of her for you there easy enough, and no questions asked.” “I’m, yes, I suppose that would be the best thing. . . . What’ll she fetch?” “Well, precious little, I’m afraid, the state she’s in. But I’ll do my best for the depot. . . . I’m sure you could fix the papers, eh, Captain Coram?” He gave the Captain a look, and the Captain gave *him* a look. “I suppose she is sick, Turner?” the Captain said after a bit, looking at him with those piggy little eyes, “I mean, we don’t want any mistakes, do we? What? What?” “If you doubt my word,” said the Guv’nor – and he sounded like an icicle – “you had better send for Major

Roper." But by now things had gone too far and there wasn't a thing the Captain could do about it. Of course, he'd been hoping to lay his hands on Firefly himself. The Guv'nor knew he'd been feathering his nest long before this. And the Captain knew that he knew! So he handed Firefly over to the Guv'nor. He was pretty glum about it though. After the Guv'nor had gone he said to me: "Turner, it's a funny thing that your father can cure *some* horses and not others." "Oh, sir," I said as innocent as a lamb, "if the Guv'nor can't do anything about it, you can take it from me it must be bad. You don't want her dying on your hands now, do you? What would Major Roper say?" "Quite! Quite! That will do, my man!" Well, of course, we got old Bledisloe to bid for Firefly at the Chaddenham auction. Knocked her down for a song. By then she *was* in a pretty bad way. After all, you've got to make it *realistic*.'

'Realistic!' Aunt Glad interrupted. 'You've got to make it realistic,' she repeated when the audience failed to respond.

'Get on with it, my boy!' Great-uncle Charlie urged.

'There's not much more. The Guv'nor went out to Bledisloe's place and he had Firefly as right as rain within a month. And then of course after a decent interval . . .'

'A decent interval!' Aunt Glad interrupted again, gesturing angrily with one hand to arouse the audience to a proper expression of appreciation.

'And I will say for the Guv'nor he gave old Bledisloe a fair price – a very fair price.'

'Ah well!' Uncle Ernest went on, looking round him and grinning; he had a defiant expression and even ventured to wink at Mrs Blount. When he grinned in this rather malevolent way he looked very much like his father. 'You see, Captain Coram was calling on the Guv'nor one day. They were standing in the yard, chatting, quite casual. Suddenly I saw the Captain go red. When you touch the Captain on the raw he goes red as quick as if somebody had put a match to him. And

his neck starts to swell. . . .

'Like a cobra,' Great-uncle Charlie, who had once served as a soldier in India, interrupted in a portentous voice.

'More like a turkey cock,' Uncle Ernest corrected. 'The Guv'nor swears that one of these days his face will swell up so much that his hat – you remember, Glad, that little brown derby he wears? – will shoot off his head like a cork popping out of a bottle!'

Aunt Glad and the men laughed. Alan's mother and Mrs Blount shuddered at the grossness of the image.

'Well, what had happened?' Great-uncle Charlie demanded. Though, as he had heard the story before, he rubbed his hands in anticipation.

'Well, of course, what Captain Coram had just seen,' Uncle Ernest continued, 'was a shiny black rump. Somebody had left the flap of Firefly's stable open. "Turner," the Captain said, very nasty, "Turner, I *think* I've seen that mare before, don't you?" "Oh, do you mean Firefly?" the Guv'nor said, innocent as an unborn babe "In lovely shape, isn't she? It's a miracle – that's what it is, a miracle!" The Captain nearly choked. "I suppose you found her wandering? What? What? Suffering from am-ne-si-ah!"'

'Am-ne-si-ah!' Aunt Glad shrieked.

'"Oh dear, no!" the Guv'nor said. "*Oh dear, no!* I bought her in a legitimate line of business. Had to pay a pretty penny too – considering."'

'Ah, Ernie, me boy,' Great-uncle Charlie gasped, but he had to laugh again before he could continue: he did so with short, booming noises, like muffled cannon. 'Ah, me boy,' he got out at last, 'you haven't done so badly out of the Remount Depot!'

Uncle Ernest was too sharp not to realise that this was a dig at his evasion of military service. He darted a quick glance round the room, and an impudent look came into his face.

Whenever he was criticised on this score he preferred to brazen it out. His wife, who had not noticed the innuendo, gave him the opening.

'It was all very well for your dad!' she cried, 'but that Captain Coram nearly got his own back. On you!'

'Oh yes!' Uncle Ernest said airily. 'The mean-minded old so-and-so tried to get me called up. But he was too scared of the Guv'nor – the old man's got a thing or two on him, I can tell you. Gave me a nasty turn, though! I had a crowbar all ready to give myself a crack on the arm if the worst came to the worst. . . . Horses *do* kick, and Firefly's got *such* a temper!'

There was a gust of shocked laughter tinged with admiration.

'Oh, Ernie, Ernie! You're a *one*!' Great-uncle Charlie bellowed.

'Mind you,' Aunt Glad interrupted, her mood suddenly changing, 'I wouldn't give you *tuppence* for Firefly. Ugly, bad-tempered brute!'

'Why, she's a beauty – a real *beauty*,' Uncle Ernest said, half seriously, half bantering. He often teased her about Firefly. Alan and Meg knew that she didn't like it. They leaned round the edge of the bamboo table. There was always the chance that Aunt Glad might reach for her darning-needle.

'I bet our Ernie could tame anything on four legs,' Great-uncle Charlie said. And the cousin from Canada, to everybody's astonishment, capped the remark by adding: 'That doesn't go for Glad though!'

This produced the biggest laugh of the evening. 'Ah, but Firefly's more beautiful,' Uncle Ernest said. Aunt Glad's eyes flashed in her husband's direction as if to say: 'You wait!'

CHAPTER THREE

Uncle Ernest (who was in fact celebrating a winner) poured out the drinks. Alan's mother and Mrs Blount, who did not consider it lady-like to drink intoxicating liquids out of large glasses, were served with parsnip wine in small ones. Aunt Glad's eyes snapped with anticipation when her husband handed her a glass of 'invalid stout', its froth the colour of burnt cream. Her doctor had recommended this drink after her last confinement and periodic references were made to her 'delicacy' in order to justify the continuance of the tonic. Uncle Ernest himself preferred cider: he had a small cask propped up on the sideboard. The women brought in sandwiches, cakes and biscuits.

There was comparative silence while these refreshments were being consumed. Soon, though, Alan's mother began to chatter and giggle in a high-pitched voice.

'Oh, I could have died when Ernie was telling us about that horse!' she cried. 'To think of the Guv'nor taking it out of Captain Coram . . . Not that it was *really* right. . . . Oh, but wouldn't Hector have laughed . . . Ernie! Ernie! You *must* tell Hector when he comes!'

'Hector *does* like a good laugh,' she went on, turning to Mrs Blount. 'Hector's my brother-in-law – and Glad's – we were talking about him, you know. . . . Oh, but *of course*. You know him too, don't you? He took quite a fancy to you, didn't he?' Mrs Blount stared ahead with a haughty expression. Everybody else looked embarrassed. Alan's mother appeared not to notice. 'Ernie!' she cried, '*promise* you'll tell Hector all about Firefly!'

'All right, Lil,' Uncle Ernest said soothingly. Alan's mother

only had to take two mouthfuls of parsnip wine to become talkative. She indignantly rejected any suggestion that there was a connection. Nothing could convince her that a drink made of the innocuous product of fruit or vegetable garden could be intoxicating. She attributed the effects to 'nervous indigestion'.

At this moment Mrs Blount, glad of an opportunity to divert the conversation, held up her hand. 'Listen!' she said. 'What's that coming down the road?'

Obedying Mrs Blount's upraised finger, they listened anxiously. There was a rattle of cart-wheels in the distance. It came closer. There was a grinding noise as the brake gripped the rim of the wheel. Mrs Blount raised her eyebrows. The other women looked uneasy. Tradesmen might call in carts during the daytime, but to have visitors using such a conveyance was not a cause for pride.

'It must be Gwen and Edward,' Alan's grandmother said. There was a marked reserve in her tone. She was on bad terms with her elder sister Gwen and her husband. Everybody else in the family shared her view, but though quarrels were frequent, indeed almost continuous, nobody ever suggested putting an end to relations. This anomaly had struck Alan recently: he accepted it as a natural phenomenon.

'I wonder what *they* want,' Aunt Glad said in a voice half angry, half fearful. Great-uncle Edward was a haulier and junkman and well to do: it was rumoured that he had lent money to the Guv'nor whose business, in spite of his various ingenuities, was like all establishments of its kind beginning to feel the pressure of changed circumstances, especially in view of the impending disbandment of the Remount Depot.

While the visitors were dismounting and Great-uncle Edward was adjusting his nag's nose-bag (an act which, according to Uncle Ernest, he performed out of incanance and not because he had a 'proper respect' for his animal), everybody tried to adjust his face to the appropriate expression.

'I bet it's about the writing-cabinet!' the cousin from Canada exclaimed, once again demonstrating his grasp of proceedings despite all appearances to the contrary. They stared at him.

'I wonder,' Alan's grandmother said. 'Gwen's been on about that writing-cabinet ever since poor Cora . . .' She never referred to her favourite daughter's death in so many words.

'Ye . . . s . . . that's it!' Aunt Glad said. 'She's always saying Cora left it to *her*.'

'It's *mine*!' Alan's mother exclaimed in a dramatic voice: she was still tipsy.

'I'm sure I shan't know how to look her in the face!' Aunt Glad cried wrathfully.

'Gwen always *did* have an eye for the main chance,' her mother said, composing her hands in her lap to match the severe lines of her face.

'The old hag!' Uncle Ernest added, exercising the privilege of outspokenness belonging to one who was not a blood relation.

'Though she's my own sister,' his mother-in-law said, with a sharp glance in his direction to indicate that she felt he had pushed the privilege too far, 'she is hard. I'm sorry to have to say so – but she's *hard*.'

Meg, who had been dozing for the past few minutes, her face resting on Alan's knees, her tow-coloured mop tickling his face, woke up. When the middle room was packed with people it soon grew stuffy, and the noise of conversation and laughter bouncing backward and forwards round the walls, set up a vibration that had a soporific effect. The corner by the bamboo table was particularly hot. Meg liked it primarily for its cosiness and intimacy. Although she watched the scene around her with wide astonished eyes, she could also shut it out at will. For her it was a spectacle rather than a reality: or at any rate a reality so remote that the premonitory echoes were of the faintest. She would lean her elbows on Alan's knees, prop her head on her hands and gaze out through the legs, animate and in-

animate, as through a peep-hole: then she would yawn and turn her head aside to contemplate the pattern on the linoleum with just as much interest, drawing a peremptory curtain over the show. But Alan never let his eyes or ears wander for a second, and if Meg lifted her head he would rest his hand on it to flatten the curls which threatened to impede his view. What was happening in front of him was enthralling, ever-changing, demanding his ceaseless vigilance. It was not personally his concern, it belonged, it sometimes seemed to him, to a different race of beings, but it was not a peep-show whose illusions he could dispel with the wink of an eye. It was a drama from which he was separated by a mere row of footlights. He could not tear his eyes away. Sometimes he envied Meg her ability to detach herself so completely, and sometimes, why he did not know, it caused him a pang.

They were equally alert now. They considered they had a vested interest in the writing-cabinet. They were not in the least surprised by the fuss. They knew that in every family there was some innocent object which became the focus of conflicting emotions. It was only natural, too, that a treasure such as this should be a bone of contention.

'If she thinks she's going to walk off with my writing-cabinet, she's mistaken!' Alan's mother exclaimed, with unwonted pugnacity.

'She's not really *used to objets d'art*, is she?' Mrs Blount interposed. Mrs Blount's husband worked in the department of Customs and Excise. He was not merely a white-collar worker, but a Civil Servant. Conversational flourishes of this kind were therefore expected of Mrs Blount. She would have sunk in her friends' esteem if from time to time she had failed to produce them.

'I should think not!' Alan's grandmother replied tartly, drawing herself up in order to remind Mrs Blount that she, too, knew her own value and those of Majuba Road. Her relations regarded

her respectfully. They were remembering the 'superior' house in the 'superior' neighbourhood where she had once lived with Cora. Her sister Gwen, on the other hand, lived in a ramshackle house in a decayed part of the town which was 'almost as bad as the back streets'. The house was as forbidding inside as out, because she and her husband were too mean to furnish it. 'It's so poor in Gwen's house,' Alan had heard his grandmother say, 'that a titmouse couldn't get a living there.'

'No! No! I won't have it!' Aunt Glad cried, 'I will not *have* them in my house!' Then, catching her sister-in-law's eye, hastily corrected herself: 'I will not have them in this room!' She bounced up and down in her chair, her eyes flashing. Suddenly she snatched a darning-needle from the sewing machine and began to brandish it. Her husband looked apprehensive.

'Now, now,' her mother said, speaking to her as if she were still in pinafores, 'we must set a good example, mustn't we? After all, she's your own flesh and blood.'

'Well, all right,' Aunt Glad said, 'but don't let them think they can come the boity-toity with me.'

There was a rat-tat on the front-door knocker: these were visitors who decidedly did *not* have the right of direct access to the middle room.

No one moved. After several seconds, Alan's father got to his feet. 'I suppose I'd better answer the door?' he said, and waited a moment, hoping that someone would contradict him. He straightened his rince-nez, gave an apologetic cough and walked slowly to the middle room door. There was another rat-a-tat-tat, like an angry bark. He jumped and hurried out into the passage. While he was gone the others sat upright in their chairs, staring straight ahead, their arms folded. They heard the opening and shutting of the front door. Then Alan's father was heard murmuring something in his gentle voice with its apologetic laugh. The women exchanged glances. The disadvantage of despatching this particular emissary was apparent.

The sound of the visitors' voices was in key with the shuffle of their feet along the passage. Both suggested extreme decrepitude. In fact, Great-aunt Gwen was a few years younger than her sister, and by a good many the junior of Great-uncle Charlie. But their voices sounded creaking and lustreless. When the door of the middle room opened they stood in the doorway, sniffing and blinking in the light like shrews. They were both tall and thin. They were both bent, but in different places. Great-aunt Gwen's figure described a sad and discouraged arc, whereas in her husband's case it was only the neck and head that sagged, like a plant with a broken stem. Great-aunt Gwen wore a battered straw hat; her hair was brown but dingy. She was enveloped in a fawn mackintosh cloak which hung straight from her shoulders. There were flaps through which she could put her arms, but when she drew them in Alan used to imagine that she was inside a small tent, or one of those seaside wraps under which, with much wriggling, people attempted to undress. At the moment, however, one arm protruded: she was holding a parcel wrapped in newspaper.

Great-uncle Edward, who dealt in second-hand clothes and who replenished his wardrobe from stock he could not dispose of, was wearing an old serge jacket, a pair of brown trousers with a pin-stripe, and a waistcoat taken from yet another second-hand suit. Across the waistcoat was suspended a metal watch chain from which dangled a row of tarnished ornaments. His shirt was of oatmeal-coloured flannel with a black stripe: his stiff collar, round and narrow, like a clergyman's in reverse, had once been white, but was now as yellow as the ivories of an ancient piano. His knitted tie had once been black, but was now a rusty brown. He had a yellow face with scanty eyebrows and a smudge of a moustache which looked as if it had been made with burnt cork: there was a black and grey stubble like iron filings on his chin.

'Drinking!' he exclaimed in a hollow voice. He turned to-

wards Uncle Ernest and shook his head sorrowfully. 'Costs a pretty penny, eh?'

This was an oblique reference to the money he had lent to the Guv'nor. Uncle Ernest was unruffled. 'Have a drop, Uncle?' he asked innocently.

'Never touch the stuff!' He clicked his tongue as Uncle Ernest raised his glass of cider.

His wife scrutinised each member of the family in turn, and shook her head as if reflecting on their inadequacy. 'Ullo, Bess,' she said to her sister. 'Ullo, Charlie.' She turned to her brother. 'Ow's the legs?' and before he could reply added: 'Me back's bad!' Then she cast her eyes over the rest of her relations: 'Ullo, Ernie. 'Ullo, Arthur. 'Ullo, Lil.' She sighed as if the effort had been too much for her. Her eyes alighted on the cousin from Canada. 'Oo's this?' she said. 'He says he's Edna's cousin's second boy,' Alan's mother replied haughtily. 'Oh, ah?' She gave the cousin from Canada a long stare. She noticed Mrs Blount for the first time. 'Good evn'ing, Mrs Blount,' she said. She spoke with remarkable civility. She was as capable of sounding her aitches as any other member of the family, but as a rule she and her husband scorned to do so. They cultivated a rough manner of speaking, exaggerating the West Country burr, in order to express their contempt of anything 'soft'. In their view 'talking posh', together with social graces of all kinds, was associated with a flippant attitude towards money.

Alan and Meg were spared their greetings. As soon as the visitors entered they had pulled down the cloth on the bamboo table, although the fringe still afforded them a partial view. They hated Great-aunt Gwen's embrace. She gripped them tightly by the upper arm and presented her face in such a way that their lips were bound to encounter a bristle, as sharp as a snippet of wire, that grew at one corner of her withered mouth. As for Great-uncle Edward, he never invited endearments. If

he saw them he eyed them speculatively as if calculating how much they cost to clothe and feed.

The visitors sat down. Great-aunt Gwen carefully laid her newspaper parcel on the floor beside her. Then she straightened herself, and in a truculent tone of voice announced: 'Well, I s'pose you know wot we've come for. I'd be obliged if you'd 'and it over.' There was a pause.

'We have no idea whatsoever to what you are referring,' her sister replied on behalf of the company as a whole, sounding her aspirates with particular care.

'She wants that ther writin'-cabinet!' Great-uncle Edward snapped.

'Is she talking about *my* writing-cabinet?' Alan's mother inquired, affecting a puzzled air.

'That'll do, Lil!' Great-aunt Gwen rounded on her. 'You know very well that Cora wanted *me* to 'ave it.'

Alan's father, who had been looking from one to the other, smiling at each remark, as if he were hoping that the whole business was really a joke, the point of which had not yet emerged, suddenly flushed.

'I think you must have misunderstood, Aunt,' he said. She cast a wary look at him.

'I might 'ave guessed as much,' she said, and adopting a whining voice. 'Dear, dear, wot *would* poor Cora say if she could see us now? Enough to make 'er turn in 'er grave. An' when I think of all I did for 'er.'

'H'm!' Aunt Glad snorted. Her aunt shot a baleful glance in her direction.

'Night after night I nursed 'er,' she went on. 'Workin' me fingers to the bone, talkin' to 'er an' tryin' to cheer 'er up.'

'H'm!' Aunt Glad snorted again.

'An' you can keep her "h'm's" to yerself!' her aunt snapped. Aunt Glad jumped up and down in her chair so that the springs creaked. Uncle Ernest patted her shoulder, murmuring: 'Easy,

girl! Easy does it!' as if he were soothing a nervous mount.

Great-uncle Edward looked at him and leered. 'You an' me don't want any quarrel, do we, me boy?' Aunt Glad, remembering the money he had put into the riding school, swallowed her vexation. Uncle Ernest went on patting her shoulder.

'I've been askin' for that writin'-cabinet,' her aunt continued, 'ever since poor Cora passed on – askin' an' askin' till I'm blue in the face.' The mention of Cora's name upset her sister, who took out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

'So you're goin' to 'ang on to it?' Great-aunt Gwen demanded, switching her attack to Alan's mother.

'Cora gave it to me,' she replied, her voice trembling slightly.

'There's no more to be said,' Alan's grandmother interrupted, regaining her haughty manner. 'I'll show you to the door now, Gwendolen and Edward.' She rose to her feet and stood before them, very upright, smoothing the folds of her black dress. The visitors did not stir.

'We wants wot's due to us,' Great-uncle Edward said. 'An' 'ere we sits till we gets it.'

Aunt Glad could contain herself no longer. 'The very idea!' she cried, pushing her husband's hand aside and leaping to her feet. 'Coming along here with a pack of lies!'

'Ho! Lies, is it?' her aunt shouted back. 'I suppose you'll be sayin' next that I didn't wear meself to a shadow nursin' yer pore sister?'

'Wear yourself to a shadow indeed,' Aunt Glad scoffed. 'You mean pushing yourself in to see what you could get!'

Her aunt raised her eyes piously to the ceiling. 'Pore Cora!' she cried. 'The times she's wep' in me arms!'

'She was crying because you got on her nerves, if you must know. She told me so. We had to lock the door to keep you out – doctor's orders. Of course you've forgotten that!'

'Ave you forgot yer pore sister's dying wishes?'

'If Cora said you were to have the cabinet – and it's a big "if" –

she knew as well as you did that she'd already given it to Lil. *If she said it, then you bullied her into it!*

'That I should live to see the day. Spoke to like that by me own flesh an' blood.'

'Nobody invited you to come.'

'An' *you'd* better keep a civil tongue in yer 'cad, me girl.'

'Don't you "my girl" me!'

There was a hubbub of voices and a scraping of chairs as everybody – with the exception of Mrs Blount – joined in. In the midst of it, Alan's father suddenly called out 'Stop!' in a surprisingly authoritative voice. They turned to stare at him. When he was angry he flushed, but his face was so pale that the blood turned it a delicate strawberry colour. Alan was well versed in these gradations of colouring. No other family, it seemed to him, blushed so often or so variously. It was a language in itself.

Alan's father swallowed once or twice and then continued. 'We've had quite enough. I know Cora's wishes as well as anyone,' and he looked sternly at his aunt, who knew that there had been a close bond between brother and sister. 'I'm quite certain that she meant Lil to have the writing-cabinet. And what she would say,' his voice trembled, 'if she knew someone – I don't care *who* – was trying to take it away from her. . . .' He couldn't go on, and his aunt, taking heart, sat down again.

'Ah, but she might 'ave changed her mind,' she said. Her nephew found his voice again. 'This is my house,' he said. 'You've upset us all *quite* enough. I must ask you to leave!'

Eying him askance, his aunt and uncle got up and made their way to the door. Aunt Glad, her mother and sister-in-law followed, and those left in the middle room could hear a running fight of accusation and counter-accusation proceeding from the passage. The three women returned. Aunt Glad slammed the door behind her so hard that several flakes of plaster fell from the ceiling – there was often a little heap of

plaster and powdered ceiling-wash on the floor beside the door of the middle room.

'Well, that's got rid of them,' she exclaimed. 'They won't show their faces here again in a hurry!' But no sooner had she spoken than the door was flung open and Great-aunt Gwen once more confronted them. 'An' 'ow are we to get out, may I ask?' she cried, her eyes flashing triumphantly. 'A fine lot *you* are to give yerself airs. We seen 'em carryin' on right on the doorstep. Downright disgustin' I calls it!' Uncle Ernest jumped to his feet and pushed past her. 'Come on in, you two!' he bellowed. Sheepishly, Molly and Victor came into the room.

'How often have I told you not to hang about on the doorstep?' Uncle Ernest shouted, and he boxed Molly's ears. Molly's lips trembled. Victor hung his head: his Adam's apple worked up and down. Aunt Glad looked daggers at her husband. Alan and Meg felt sorry for Molly and Victor. They also felt sorry for Uncle Ernest: they knew he would have to pay for his outburst later.

Great-aunt Gwen meanwhile stood in the doorway, shaking her head and tut-tutting gleefully at having so unexpectedly extracted moral victory out of defeat. 'Well, well, wot *are* we comin' to?' she said. 'Would you *believe* it? In front of the 'ole neighbourhood. The 'ussy!'

'Don't you dare call my daughter a hussy!' Aunt Glad waved the darning-needle. Uncle Ernest caught her in his arms: she struggled violently, muttering threats in his ear. Great-aunt Gwen let out a scornful bark of laughter and retreated, slamming the door behind her.

There was a babel of voices in the middle room. As it reached Alan and Meg in their corner it sounded quite different from the previous conversation. The change was like that of the sea when the wind suddenly shifts or the tide turns. Instead of a rhythmic give and take, shouts and cries were thrown upwards like choppy waves. Alan caught only those words that related

to his father. . . . 'Did you hear Arthur?' 'Did you see how he stood up to them?' . . . 'You could have knocked me down with a feather when our Arthur ups and gives them what for!' . . . 'They caught a Tartar they didn't expect in our Arthur!' Alan's father, however, looked unhappy: he was wondering whether he had gone too far.

Molly and Victor, taking advantage of the hubbub, sat down near the bamboo table. Alan gazed at the backs of their legs which were so close that he could have leaned forward and touched them. It seemed to him that whereas their knees protruded into the loud, garish world of the grown-ups, their calves were secretly turned towards the corner where he and Meg were ensconced. He knew by the stiff way in which they held their faces that they had difficulty in keeping back their tears. Their arms hung disconsolately at the sides of their chairs. A moment later their hands brushed against each other; accidentally at first so that they jerked apart in surprise; then gropingly until their fingers came together.

At this point the cousin from Canada got to his feet, buttoned up his greasy mackintosh, said: 'Night, all. It *has* been enjoyable!' and left the room. They stared after him, uncertain whether to be indignant at such an inadequate summing-up, realised that they too had enjoyed themselves and burst out laughing.

Mrs Blount yawned and looked at the clock. Uncle Ernest poured out the rest of the beer for Great-uncle Charlie. Alan's father murmur: 'Must put Nipper out.' At the sound of his name, Nipper, who had been sleeping on the hearth-rug impervious to the turmoil around him, gave a loud 'Prrrm!' and, like a spring uncoiling, uncurled himself and jumped to his feet in one movement. He advanced to the door, his tail held high, looking impatiently at Alan's father over his shoulder. His emergence from among their feet directed the attention of Alan's mother and Aunt Glad to the lower levels of the room.

They clapped their hands to their mouths in dismay, looked at each other as if conferring as to how much that had transpired had been 'unfit for childish ears', peered into the corner, saw four raised knees like the keyboard of a miniature piano and exclaimed: 'Good gracious! The children!'

Alan and Meg came out on their hands and knees and stood up, blinking. It was a moment that was followed by a sense of anti-climax. Just as in the garden when they emerged from their hide-out in the hedge, or when after lying flat on the grass they stood upright again, everything seemed momentarily to have shrunk, so in the middle room the change of perspective meant a diminution of enchantment. The room appeared smaller. The gas-jet bubbled more audibly and its light fell more harshly on the cheap furniture and the shabby patches of wallpaper and linoleum. The bottles and glasses no longer glittered resplendently. They were conscious of the smell of the beer and stout. More alarming was the alteration in the stature of the adults. Recently Alan had awakened to the fact that he was growing fast, and as he grew, like a sapling in a copse, he drew nearer and nearer to the surrounding trees, so that eventually, he supposed, he would have to take his place among them. He did not like it at all. The corner by the bamboo table was a refuge in more senses than one. From this angle it took no effort to magnify the creatures that breathed and snorted and creaked and roared around them, and so to extend the gap that separated them. Feet and legs appeared of monstrous size: chests and shoulders spread massively: chins and cheek-bones jutted. The flashing of eyes and teeth, the flushing of necks and faces was heightened, and the rumble of voices was deafening. There were times when it seemed to him that an armful of thunder and lightning had been released in the middle room.

Once he was on his feet the demi-gods were sadly reduced. They registered their awareness of the children's presence by

the usual lowering of voices, special tones of voice, compressed lips and significant glances, the usual bending from the hip, tilting of heads, chucking under chins, the usual pattings and proddings and silly jokes and incomprehensible laughter, and all the falsities whereby they sought to demonstrate that they had the entry to the children's world even if the children were barred from theirs. It was now, too, that he noticed that his elders were perspiring, that Great-uncle Charlie's nose was pitted with blue-black specks as if he had been working in a coal-mine, that his grandmother's dentures did not fit, that Aunt Glad had shaved carelessly under her arm-pits, that even the awe-inspiring Mrs Blount had applied her last 'powder-paper' in a hurry so that there was an orange streak along one side of her nose, that . . . But he checked himself. He knew from experience that once one had started on this process of observation it might end in nightmare.

He envied Meg her ability to regard the blemishes that a close-up vision revealed with nothing but the most dispassionate curiosity, as if they were marks on the map of a country still impossibly remote. Even when she was on her feet she was far enough away for distance still to lend enchantment. Once again he regretted the inches that separated them. He looked at Molly and Victor with fresh affection. In this process of tawdry transformation they alone remained untouched, wandering hand-in-hand in some no man's land between childhood and adulthood which was impervious to both.

But the evening's drama was not over. Mrs Blount, having said her good-byes, had been escorted to the front door by Alan's father. They heard him close the door and enter the front room. They heard the 'pop!' of the gas, then a startled exclamation. A moment later he burst into the middle room. 'It's gone!' he cried.

'What's gone?'

'The writing-cabinet!'

'No!' . . . 'Impossible!' . . . 'Are you sure?'

'Come and see for yourselves.' They all trooped into the front room. There was no sign of the writing-cabinet in its usual place on the sideboard. Alan's mother searched everywhere, then ran upstairs to make sure that she had not taken it to her bedroom.

'No,' she cried when she returned. 'It's gone! There's no doubt about it.' She was close to tears.

They assembled again in the middle room. 'But *where* can it have gone to?' Great-uncle Charlie said.

'Do you know?' Aunt Glad exclaimed suddenly. They stopped talking and looked at her. Her mother slowly nodded her head. 'I know what you're thinking,' she said, 'and it shames me to have to say it.'

Great-uncle Charlie snorted through his moustaches. Uncle Ernest swore. Alan's mother stared at her sister-in-law aghast.

'Oh *no*! Surely not!' Alan's father cried, waving his hand as if to brush something away.

'Of course it is!' Aunt Glad exclaimed. 'Don't you remember? When Aunt Gwen came back? . . . Just before you boxed Molly's ears. . . .' She darted a glance at her husband to remind him that this new crisis had not driven the incident out of her mind. 'Don't you remember – Uncle Edward didn't come back with her? We *thought* he'd gone to get the horse ready. . . .'

'And all the time the old . . .'

'Sh! The children . . .'

'Had nipped into the front room . . .'

'Collared the writing-cabinet . . .'

'And now they're laughing fit to bust!'

'Would you believe it?'

'It's enough to make your blood boil!'

'If I lay my hands on that . . .'

'It's what you might expect! I hate to say it, but . . .'

'I've a good mind to get the police!'

But at the word 'police' Meg burst into tears. Even she no longer felt that she was watching a spectacle. The tremors she was experiencing were no longer pleasurable. She had been snatched from her box and set in the middle of the stage. The angry voices and gestures were, she had realised, not designed for her entertainment: they were unpleasantly real and she was frightened.

Her mother swooped and caught her up in her arms. She smothered her face in kisses. Her aunt ran off to get her a piece of chocolate: while she was gone her grandmother found a peppermint in the pocket of her dress. Meg's sobs began to subside into little gasps like the last puffs of wind in a pair of bellows. They didn't prevent her sucking the peppermint: she clutched the piece of chocolate in her right hand. 'There! There!' soothing voices surrounded her on all sides. Soon a sinug expression stole over her face. When her father said: 'Shall Daddy carry his darling?' she held out her arms immediately. When she was in his arms she looked down at Alan. Her cheeks had the plump, almost swollen look they always had when she was being petted. 'Alan too,' she said. Alan's father gave his apologetic laugh. Since his return from the army he had never been sure whether he ought to take such liberties with his son. Meg, however, pointed her finger peremptorily. He stooped down, picked Alan up and the two fathers proceeded upstairs. Meg quickly disengaged herself when they reached the bedroom and tumbled into bed. Alan felt uncomfortable in his father's arms which still felt strange to him: nevertheless, he unloosed his hold reluctantly. He climbed into bed and pulled the blankets up to his chin. Meg was asleep by the time the door had closed behind the two men. Alan lay awake listening to the angry murmur of voices which had started up again in the middle room. The sound filled him with dread. It was a trumpet-call he had no wish to answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alan was the first to see the snapshot. It fluttered from the envelope which his grandmother had opened. He picked it up. It showed two figures leaning over the rail of a ship, a woman in nurse's uniform, the sleeves of the blouse rolled up to the elbow, and a man in a peaked officer's cap and a bush shirt, the sleeves also rolled up, disclosing brawny forearms. The snapshot, in sepia, was a poor one. The man's broad nose stood out clearly, but the rest of the face appeared merely as a pattern of clefts and hollows. For some reason Alan felt his heart thumping: he could not recall having seen it before, but he had the sensation of previous knowledge, as of a face extruded from the shadowy background of his dreams.

Perhaps it was simply that he reacted to the atmosphere of expectancy. Both families were assembled in the kitchen for a communal breakfast, but everybody stopped eating as his grandmother studied the letter, every now and then reading passages out aloud. "You see, I've kept my promise - this is the *second* letter in a week." . . . Well, that's true. "Looking forward to seeing you again soon, Mother dear." . . . H'm! "Mother" indeed! "Dear" indeed! But she flushed with pleasure. "We must go, you and I, on a pilgrimage of memory to Winthrop Avenue" . . . The same old blarney. . . . "Would you make arrangements for Cora's grave to be set in order? Money no object - I'll pay you when we meet." . . . So he actually remembers! . . . "Would you also be so kind as to order the biggest wreath you can find? The very best that money can buy now." . . . Yes, I know - always ready to throw his money about - especially if it isn't his own. . . . "Needless

to say, I'll settle up when I arrive – and a nice bit over for you.” . . . I've heard *that* one before. . . . “I shall, of course, go to dear Cora's grave as soon as I can – to pay the respects of a devoted husband.” . . . Oh, a likely tale, a likely tale indeed! Not a word of *when* he's coming, you notice. . . . What's this? What's this?

She read the rest of the letter to herself. When she had finished she laid the letter in her lap and sat very still. A tear appeared at the corner of her left eye and trickled down her cheek. Alan watched it fascinated: it was identical in colour to the silvery grey skin: it was like a drop of moisture squeezed out of her face. He did not associate it with grief until the grown-ups crowded round with exclamations of concern. Aunt Glad snatched up the letter. ‘Read it. Read it, my girl,’ her mother told her, ‘I haven't the heart to go on.’ Aunt Glad's dark eyes darted over the surface of the paper: the colour came and went in her cheeks: she kept tossing her head, laughing silently one moment, compressing her lips scornfully the next: one could almost follow the contents by watching her face. When, however, she came to the place where her mother had broken off she began a staccato running commentary.

‘He's definitely coming. . . . “any day now” . . . can't give us an exact date . . . he has “commitments” . . . he says he will be delayed because of “common politeness” . . . ah!’ She uttered an exclamation and glanced quickly at her mother. ‘So you've come to it,’ the old lady said. Aunt Glad tried to look solemn, but her eyes sparkled as she returned to the letter. ‘He has to escort Nurse Crossett to her parents . . . only “common politeness”, he says . . . she looked after him on the troopship when he had malaria. . . . He says he has to take her to her parents “the other side of London” . . . he says he ought to pay his respects to them . . .’ a matter of common politeness.’

‘Common politeness!’ her mother exclaimed. ‘It's the first time I've heard it called *that*!’ Then she noticed the snapshot

in Alan's hand. 'What have you got there, boy?' she cried with unaccustomed sharpness, and snatched it from him. She examined it carefully. 'Nurse Crossett!' she murmured. 'Common politeness!' Tears began to fall in earnest. This time she received less attention. The snapshot was being passed from hand to hand. 'She looks very ladylike,' Alan's mother said, brushing the photograph with her hand as if hoping to remove the shadows.

'How *could* he?' her mother-in-law cried.

'Oh, I don't know, Mother,' Uncle Ernest said. 'You mustn't jump to conclusions, you know. After all, if this Nurse Crossett looked after him so well he had to show his appreciation, didn't he? You know what a gent Hector is.'

'That's more than you'll ever be!' his wife snapped. He looked at her with a hurt, puzzled expression. But she had fallen into a reverie. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, her elbows resting on her knees, her hands cupping her chin. Her face was flushed and her lips parted: a lock of frizzy black hair fell over her forehead: Alan thought he had never seen her look so pretty.

'When you're on these ships,' Alan's father said, anxious to put the best construction on the matter, and speaking too with a touch of archness, 'you can't always help getting a bit pally with the nurses, you know!'

'Oh, you can't, can't you?' his wife said.

He gave her a half-hearted wink.

'Yes, that's right,' Uncle Ernest broke in, not to be outdone in knowledge of the ways of the world. 'A big healthy chap like that!'

'Oh, there's no *real* harm in Hector,' Alan's mother added: she spoke in a mild, gentle voice: to his astonishment Alan saw that a moment later she too fell into a reverie.

Aunt Glad aroused herself from hers. 'Mother,' she said, 'I think you're making too much of it.'

‘Well!’

‘I expect it’s just as he says – he’s being polite.’

‘So you’d find excuses for him, would you? And what about poor Cora?’

‘But really, Mother! Cora has been gone . . .

‘Not much more than a twelvemonth. If it seems a long time to you it doesn’t to me,’ and she began to dab her eyes with her handkerchief.

‘There, there, Mother! We all know how much .

‘If you’ve no proper respect for the . . . the departed, I should have thought *he* would.’

‘But what has Hector done? Surely you don’t expect him never to speak to another woman?’

‘There’s a proportion in everything.’

‘Well, I shan’t hold it against him. I shall be glad to see him again. It’s about time we had some life about the place,’ and she threw a contemptuous look in her husband’s direction.

‘Oh, me too,’ her sister-in-law chimed in. ‘I’m looking forward to it. D’you remember the fun we used to have when Hector was here before. . . ? I mean,’ she added hastily, ‘the time *before* the last. . . .’

‘I’m surprised at you,’ her mother-in-law said, getting to her feet. ‘I’m surprised at you both. Poor Cora!’

‘But you’ll want to see him, won’t you, Mother?’ Alan’s mother asked anxiously.

‘He is still Cora’s husband,’ the old lady replied severely. ‘You forget how much the three of us meant to each other . . . in the old days . . . in Winthrop Avenue. . . .’ She made for the door. ‘We were close,’ she said as she left the kitchen, ‘very close.’

Alan’s father snatched up his hat and coat: ‘I shall be late for the office.’

‘I think I’d better come with you, Arthur,’ Uncle Ernest said. ‘I’ve got to go to Denton today. The Guv’nor and me have got

to see about entering Firefly for the jumping. . . .' He waited a moment. Sometimes his wife accompanied him on these occasions: she liked the trip to Denton Hill, where the annual agricultural show was held. But she didn't as much as glance in his direction. She and her sister-in-law were busy re-reading Uncle Hector's letter, referring every now and then to the snapshot and talking in whispers.

'There's going to be a lot of chin-wagging today,' Uncle Ernest said and led the way out of the kitchen.

The two women sat on among the uncleared breakfast things, talking in those mysterious tones, attended by significant looks and whisperings and even intervals of mime in which whole sentences were silently mouthed, that were reserved for affairs of an inalienably adult nature. Alan and Meg were bored: it was raining outside and they could not escape to the garden. Even school would have been preferable, Alan reflected. But it was the half-term holiday. In any case their attendance was irregular: they were going through the cycle of children's complaints and their parents tended to forget how long the periods of convalescence had lasted. In addition Alan found that the excitement which he had experienced when he first looked at the snapshot had been succeeded by a fit of depression. He felt unaccountably guilty and apprehensive.

Dinner, which the two families took together in the kitchen, was late and disorganised. The food was badly cooked and important ingredients had been forgotten. One or other of the women would jump to her feet exclaiming: '*There!* I forgot to put salt in the potatoes!' or: 'I could have *sworn* I'd put out enough knives!' and laughing in an exaggerated manner. During the meal Alan's grandmother sat silent and on her dignity. The younger women avoided the topic of the day, though it was obvious that they were itching to return to it. When, however, they had pushed their plates aside and were drinking the cups of strong sweet tea without which no meal

was complete, Alan's grandmother herself broke the deadlock.

'Oh yes,' she said, 'I shall receive him – for Cora's sake.' And at the signal the younger women again began to talk about Uncle Hector and his impending visit. Although she sat very upright, holding her head erect, her mouth drawn in at the corners, the old lady listened intently and egged them on whenever they showed signs of flagging.

After dinner had been cleared away Aunt Glad ran across the road to invite Mrs Blount to tea.

Alan and Meg groaned at the thought of another meal-time devoted to innuendoes and mysteries, but when Aunt Glad returned she announced that it had stopped raining. Alan begged his mother to let them have their tea in the garden. As a rule she entered into these preparations with gusto. She would tell them that they were about to set out on an expedition to distant parts and would assemble packets of raisins, biscuits, cakes and sweets. She called these 'iron rations' and she would stow them in a haversack which her husband had brought back from the war, and which was one of Alan's most prized possessions. She invested the proceedings with a delicious atmosphere of adventure and the children loved her for it, especially as she spoke of their den as a 'secret' and pretended she had no idea where it was. Today, she merely snatched a few half-baked cakes from the oven, thrust them into a paper bag and murmured absent-mindedly: 'Run along now.'

Thankfully Alan and Meg closed the kitchen door behind them. When they were wet the paving-stones of the yard turned a petrol-blue colour. But the moment they stepped on to them the sun broke loose from a cloud, blazing as if in anger. A breath seemed to pass over the flagstones and a moment later they were slate-grey.

They did not hurry at once into the garden itself. They were conscious of a certain reluctance on its part to receive them, as if it were warning them that for once their moods might not

coincide. But Tony emerged from behind the water-butt with a flop: he paused for a moment and they could have sworn he had glanced over his shoulder as if to say: 'Leave this to me.' Then he leaped into the long grass as if he were their emissary and immediately they felt the atmosphere change.

They were about to break into a run when there was a rustling in the hedge to their left and Mr Cowcher's face appeared. He was smiling: his cheeks and nose shone in harmony with his boots as if they had been polished with the same velvet pad. 'Hey there!' he called in a loud whisper, glancing around him to make sure that no one else would see this break in tradition. Alan and Meg approached the gap in the hedge. 'Here, take these,' Mr Cowcher said, thrusting two apples at them. Alan pushed them, one into each of his trouser pockets. Mr Cowcher watched him intently.

'Do you know what?' he said. 'We're going to have a baby!' Alan and Meg looked at him doubtfully: they had heard so many references to the childless state of Mr and Mrs Cowcher that they had difficulty in digesting this piece of information.

'Where's you going to find him?' Meg demanded.

'Oh, he's coming, he's coming! He's on his way,' Mr Cowcher replied, beaming.

'Is he coming by train?' Alan inquired politely.

'He'll be here in the autumn. You wait! Mrs Cowcher will see to it.' Although his whole face glowed with delight and he kept rising up and down on his toes in excitement the children were astonished to see tears in his eyes.

'Isn't you glad?' Meg asked.

'Oh yes – glad – very glad!'

Meg grunted.

Alan, knowing her propensity for scathing remarks, hastened to interpose: 'Will it be a boy?' he asked.

'Perhaps,' Mr Cowcher chuckled. 'And then again perhaps it will be a girl – like you!' And he thrust his hand through the

hedge as far as it would go in order to touch Meg's mop of curls. She submitted, a sulky expression on her face.

'Well, there's things to do,' Mr Cowcher said and withdrew his arm. But a moment later he pushed it back again, his fingers clasped with difficulty round two more apples, larger and rosier than the previous ones. 'Here you are,' he said. 'Go on, take them!'

'Isn't you better keep them for that baby?' Meg asked.

'No, not these. Plenty more. Go on! I want you to have them!'

Alan took the apples and after a struggle managed to get them into his trouser pockets which now bulged out like the pouches of a hamster so that the legs of his trousers practically disappeared and he had to hobble the rest of the way and had difficulty in bending down to enter the den. Mr Cowcher meanwhile let the branches of the hedge spring to and after another guilty glance to right and left returned to his gardening, humming and whistling as he worked.

Raindrops still clung to the leaves and were scattered by their passage into the den so that wet patches as big as shillings formed on their hair and bits of twig stuck to their legs. But the sun was so hot that soon it shone right through the mesh of leaves and branches and the wet patches gave off a pleasant smell like hay. Alan tugged at the apples: they were so tightly wedged that he tore the lining of one of his pockets and bruised the fruit. They bit into the bruised parts and sucked the juice. When they had finished the apples they threw the cores away: there was quite a store of them on the floor of the den: they had turned dry and brown, like fir-cones. They also ate the cakes and Alan collected some raspberries: after rain they had a particularly cool and refreshing taste. The meal over, Meg licked her fingers and leaned against her cousin. He was wearing his dark-green jersey: she liked the roughness against her cheek and the tarry smell of the wool. 'I'se like a story now,' she said.

There was a momentary interruption as Greg threw open his window, gave two blasts on his bugle, yelled: 'Oh, me nerves!' and slammed his window shut again. He liked to register his awareness of their presence. They resented it if grown-ups showed that they knew their whereabouts, but Greg was in a different category.

'It's about a prince,' Alan began.

'Is he nice?'

'Yes. Well . . . he is really, but not very at the beginning.'

'Why not?'

'A giant had done a spell and changed him.'

'What kind of giant?'

'Very big and strong. He had a red face and a lot of hair, all over his head and his face and his nose. . . .'

'His nose?'

'Yes. Hair inside his nose.'

'What did he do to the prince?'

'He had a funny smell too. . . .'

'The prince? What kind of smell?'

'No, the giant . . . I think it was the hair. He had a leather coat . . .'

'Like the coalman?'

'Yes, but it didn't smell of coal.'

'What did it smell of?'

'A leathery smell.'

'I see.'

'He had a leather thing round his wrist too. . . .'

'Lucky,' Meg said admiringly. Alan thought for a moment.

'And his face was made of leather. . . .'

But Meg thought he was presuming too far on his initial success.

'You're making it up!' she cried.

'Well, the giant changed the prince,' Alan continued hurriedly.

'Into a snake?'

'No. . . .'

'A toad?'

'No. . . .'

'What then?' Meg asked scornfully. Alan thought quickly.

'He changed him into a softie!' he announced.

'Like Greg?'

'Yes. Then he locked him up in a little room.' He hesitated.

'Well?' Meg demanded.

'This giant had a brother.'

'Yes?'

'No, I don't mean that.'

'Why not?'

'He *didn't* have a brother . . .'

'I *se want* him to have a brother. A nice brother. And he comes along and finds the prince and he . . . and he feels sorry for the prince and . . . and he says to him: "You don't like being a softie, do you?" Now *you* go on.'

'Yes. He said: "You *don't* like being a softie, do you?" "Of course not, would you?" the prince said. And the giant's brother . . .'

'Is he big and strong?'

'Yes, of course. He's really the hero.'

'Not the prince?'

'Well, not really . . .'

'P'raps they're both heroes?'

'Yes. It's a story with *two* heroes.'

'Yes.'

'Well, the giant's brother was big and strong . . .'

'Was he hairy too?'

'Well, yes. But he didn't have hairs in his nose.'

'Has *he* got a nice coat?'

'Yes. It's made of leather too. Just then the real giant came in . . .'

'You haven't said about the thing round his wrist.'

'Yes. He had one. Of course! Well, there was a fight . . .

'A terrible fight?'

'Yes. A terrible fight. And the good giant killed the bad giant and when he fell down dying he was sorry for the bad things he had done and he called out: "Take my coat off and you'll be surprised what happens!"'

'And did he?'

'Yes, he took the leather coat off the dead giant. And do you know what happened?'

'Course!'

'Yes. As soon as the nice giant pulled the bad giant's coat off, the softie jumped up and said: "I'm not a softie any more, you can tell that, can't you?" And the nice giant said: "Yes. . . ."'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. That's "THE END."''

Meg clapped her thumb in her mouth and leaned more heavily against him. 'S a nice story,' she said.

A puff of wind passed through the garden, lifting the branches of the elderberry tree, stirring the long fringes of the grass. The edge of the sun touched the top of the factory chimney in the back-streets: there was a change in the light as if someone had switched off one of the lamps among a battery of arc-lights. It was sufficient to cause a few tentative chirps among the ivy at the side of the house and to make Alan and Meg draw closer together. A moment later a bar of shadow fell across the garden and lay there like a tumbled black pole. There was a bustling sound among the branches to their right and Nipper burst into the den with his usual 'prrrr!' pretending to be surprised at finding it occupied. He settled down between them and began to purr. Rain must still have been in the air, for he was in a skittish mood, rolling on his back, pawing at their hands as they tried to stroke him and biting their fingers. Then suddenly he jumped to his feet and sniffed their noses: he began to rub his face against theirs in long sweeping

movements: they felt his lips and the edge of one of his teeth. Then, hearing a rustling in the hedge farther along the fence, he darted off.

The breeze sighed. 'Snip! Snip Snip!' went Mr Cowcher's shears. The hens clucked in the Travers' back yard. The birds in the ivy twittered again. The bar of shadow turned blacker. A butterfly appeared and began flying unsteadily across the garden as if it were drunk. For the first time a wisp of smoke from a near-by chimney showed up against the blue of the sky where a fraction of its brilliance had faded. From somewhere in Majuba Road came the sound of children's voices: it was a strange sound, half wailing, half laughing, winnowed and softened by sunshine and the atmosphere of a late afternoon that had been freshened by rain. Alan and Meg lifted their heads like cattle sniffing water. Their heads turned like convolvulus following the sun.

They sat still for a moment, listening. Then suddenly they crawled out of the den, scratching their knees in their haste, leapt to their feet and rushed along the garden, jumping and stumbling, with odd jerky movements like those of the butterfly, and letting out peal after peal of uneven laughter. Mr Cowcher dropped his shears and ran tiptoe to the gap in the hedge. Mr Poole, digging among his gloomy cabbages, rested on his spade, shook his head and muttered. But the children ran up the garden, into the kitchen and right through the house, paying no attention to the sound of the women's gossiping in the middle room, hearing only the shrill voice rising and falling in the road outside. They threw open the front door, slammed it behind them, tore open the front gate, leaving it swinging on its hinges, and rushed out into the road.

All the younger children of the neighbourhood seemed to have congregated there. The game which they were playing was a speciality of Majuba Road. Nobody knew how long it had been in existence or who had invented it. Nobody knew

why it had its own season, why at a fixed date every summer, and for a set number of weeks afterwards, never varying, all the children played it. All the children, that is, within certain age limits, for there were some who, for reasons that nobody understood, had to sit against the railings, sulky spectators, and others who had grown beyond it. The rules of the game were equally mysterious. The older children, dimly remembering their own participation, never asked awkward questions. Sometimes children from other neighbourhoods or an inquisitive adult did so. The most they could discover was that it was 'something like "odd man out"' and 'something like "last across"', and 'something like "pig in the middle"'. To the uninitiated it seemed merely to consist of dashes and counter-dashes, swirlings and eddies, groupings and re-groupings, and it was difficult to tell which were attackers and which defenders and quite impossible to discover who was 'he'.

More than anything else the movements seemed to resemble those of flocks of birds, dipping and diving across the sky in a last gambol before they assemble for migration, and their shrill cries too resembled theirs. When Alan and Meg arrived they hovered for a time like newcomers in the flock. They wheeled to and fro on the edges or with flapping arms weaved jerkily in and out, expressing their kinship but not yet attuned. Soon they too were absorbed into the flock: they dashed about as energetically and with as much mysterious purpose as the others and their shouts and laughter chimed in with theirs.

The game went on and on as if it would never stop. Mrs Cowcher, watching anxiously from her bay window, thought they would continue till they dropped. But soon extraneous forces began to threaten it. First of all a few office-workers hurrying home to their tea, frowning as they dodged the sallies and dartings of the children. Then in the distance factory hooters began to sound. An occasional car appeared, honking its horn and scattering the knots of children who still surged

backwards and forwards trying to ignore the disruptive influences. Then came a trickle of bicycles. Some of the cyclists made as if to join in the spirit of the game, sounding their bells jovially and dodging in and out of the obstacles. Others rang their bells angrily and swerved wildly about the road and a few bullies deliberately bore down on the children and chased them out of the way. Gradually they became disheartened and the game began to slacken. Soon, too, mothers in aprons began to appear at their gates calling their children in to tea or bed. Those that were left sat in a group on the pavement against the railings of Alan's and Meg's house, panting from their exertions and glancing uneasily about them as they too waited for their mothers to summon them.

Now too, as custom demanded, the two professional cross-patches of Majuba Road emerged. First of all Mr Cowcher, trying to justify his reputation in spite of the cherubic expression that still lingered on his red cheeks, making shooing noises and shaking his fist in mock rage. Then Mr Poole, intoning in his deep voice: 'Stop that godless row!' They were unabashed by Mr Cowcher, whose demonstrations had been very half-hearted of late and whose bark was known to be worse than his bite, which indeed nobody had ever witnessed. But Mr Poole with his dark face and gloomy eyes made them shudder. There were ugly rumours that he used his army belt on his children when they failed to learn their catechism.

The group by the railings had dwindled to four or five. The sun was beginning to dip behind the houses. The sky was still blue but softer in texture with a look of powdered lavender. The birds twittered loudly as they made ready to retire to their nests. Several of them dipped and wheeled across the road in imitation of the human creatures who had recently disported themselves there. In one or two houses the gas had been lit although it was too light for the curtains to be drawn: the interiors were brightly-lit grottoes, like Aladdin's caves in a

pantomime. From somewhere down the road came the sound of a gramophone playing a waltz. Across the road someone was laboriously picking out a tune on a tinny piano.

Someone turned the corner at the top of the road. Alan recognised the rhythm of the footsteps before he looked up and saw his father hurrying home to tea with his usual loping step, his head thrust slightly forward with a movement which even from this distance suggested apology. When he was half-way down the road Uncle Ernest, wearing the inevitable riding breeches, leggings and cloth cap and mounted on his bicycle, also turned the corner. He caught up his brother-in-law and dismounted. He was glad of the excuse. He used the bicycle to get to and from the riding school but he hated all 'mechanical contraptions'. He always climbed on to the bicycle from the rear, as old men do, using the steps on either side of the hub of the back wheel, with an apprehensive expression on his face as if he feared the machine might leap into motion of its own accord. He rode very inexpertly, keeping his knees too far apart as if ashamed of having a mere framework of iron between them. The only time he was happy was when he was free-wheeling and then instinctively he rose up and down in the saddle.

Before the two men reached Number Twenty there was a popping from the opposite direction and Victor drew up outside the house on his two-stroke, sounding his horn triumphantly. He wore an ancient leather motoring coat. It was several sizes too big for him and the impression of bulk was increased by the fact that it had received so many scars and tears, as if subjected to the death of a thousand cuts, that the small flaps of leather stood out in all directions, making its wearer look like a Michelin tyre man who had been tarred and feathered. On his head was a black tight-fitting leather helmet with side-pieces and goggles. Molly, wearing a red tam-o'-shanter, was perched on the pillion behind him. She sat sideways, one hand

holding on to his belt, the other struggling to compose her skirt about her knees.

The sound of the horn brought Alan's and Meg's mothers running. They reached the front gate, saw that it was too late to shepherd the children into the house before their fathers arrived, and stood with false smiles pretending to have come out solely in order to welcome their spouses. Mrs Blount emerged from the house, slipped past them and crossed the road without waiting to speak to the men. The unspoken convention of the neighbourhood forbade gossiping at this time of the day. In any case she had to get home to prepare her own husband's 'evening meal', as she called it, to distinguish it from the 'high tea' of those in lower social strata.

'Meg insisted upon waiting for you,' Aunt Glad informed her husband when he drew level. Uncle Ernest stopped and regarded the bicycle doubtfully as if he was wondering whether he ought to throw a blanket over it. When he patted the saddle Meg ran up to him and he lifted her on to it: then he wheeled her through the gate and down the passage to the kitchen where the bicycle was kept in the corner by the copper.

One small boy was still sitting against the railings, but suddenly, hearing his mother's voice somewhere in the distance – though it reached nobody else's ears – he jumped to his feet and fled. Alan got up and began to follow his parents into the house. At the same moment Molly, the mysterious confabulation at the kerb-side over, also entered the front gate. She was not going out with Victor again: it was the night she and her mother washed their hair. But Victor did not drive off at once. Instead he called after Alan's mother: 'Auntie, how about letting me take Alan out?' As Molly's official boy-friend he was entitled to use this mode of address: in any case the women had known him since he was a baby.

Alan gasped. He began to jump up and down, sobbing in his excitement. 'Please! Please! Please!'

His mother frowned at Victor. 'Oh, go on, let him come, Auntie,' he pleaded. 'I'll look after him!'

'Yes! Yes!' Alan cried, 'I want to! I want to!' He knew that on the nights when Molly stayed in Victor went out with his friends and he longed to be admitted to that wonderful world of deep voices and strange gusts of laughter. He caught at his father's sleeve. 'Oh, please tell her to say Yes'!

'But what about your high tea?' his father replied, looking questioningly at his wife.

'Oh, I'll take him to the . . .' Victor was about to say 'the fish and chip shop', but realising that this suggestion was not likely to further his cause with Alan's mother, he changed his mind and said: 'I'll get him something to eat.'

'It's a warm night. . . .' Alan's father said tentatively.

His mother appeared in the doorway. 'Oh, let the boy go!' she said. 'It will do him good.' Then she looked at Alan and added, in a caressing voice: 'He's a *big* boy.' Alan could have wept with gratitude. His grandmother often supported him on occasions such as this. She made no secret of the fact that she preferred boys to girls, and all the boys in the neighbourhood adored her. She knew their habits and the games they liked. She knew what sort of books they would enjoy: all Alan's favourite adventure stories were presents from her. Whereas the other women discouraged him from daring enterprises, she urged him into them. Above all, she had a way of speaking, in tones of gentle deterrence, that was infinitely flattering to male pride.

Alan's mother would probably not have agreed to such a revolutionary proposal in normal circumstances, but the excitements of the day had weakened her resolution. She glanced doubtfully at her husband. He nodded his head. 'Very well then,' she said. 'Just this once. But don't bring him back too late.'

'I won't,' Victor assured her.

'And don't go out with that rough lot from Majuba Street!' she added, almost changing her mind at the thought.

'Oh no! Only me and the gang,' Victor replied. She flinched at the word 'gang', but hurried indoors. The others followed. Victor waited until the door had closed behind them, then he placed Alan astride the pillion of his motor-cycle. The front door opened again, and with a quick look over her shoulder to make sure she was not being followed, Molly dashed out. She planted herself in front of Victor and said in a scolding voice: 'Now mind you look after him!' Then she bent down, hugged her cousin and, ignoring Victor, ran back into the house.

'Would you like a spin?' Victor asked in a whisper when she had gone. Alan could only nod and swallow. The few square yards of pavement, kerb and gutter occupied by himself, Victor and Victor's motor-bike, had been transformed into a *terra incognita*. And a moment later the scene received the magic it deserved as the lamp-lighter, a morose man in brown suit, cap and muffler and a brown moustache that matched exactly, and who had never been known to exchange a word with the inhabitants of Majuba Road, though he had visited it nightly for the past thirty years, suddenly appeared, and with a thrust, rattle and pop lit the lamp against which Victor's motor-cycle was leaning. Light fell on to the saddle—dog-eared and misshapen like a pancake—and spread over the group as if the cross-bars of the lamp-post had dripped golden gum. Victor brought his foot down on the starter: he coaxed his machine first into a roar, and then, with a guilty glance at the house, into a throaty hum. With a feeling of awe Alan watched him bestride the machine, and with much pulling and tugging at the skirts of the old leather coat lower himself into the hollow of the saddle. When he was satisfied that his seat gave him the maximum of comfort and control he jerked his head in order to warn Alan that they were about to start. By contrast with the saddle the pillion seemed small and insecure: it vibrated

so wildly that Alan felt as if he were on the branch of a tree that might at any moment whip him off into space. Moreover, the iron steps on either side seemed very small for his feet, and he was seized by a fear, more pleasurable than otherwise, that he might slip and be caught in the wheels. But the figure in front of him, settling itself deeper and deeper into the body of the machine, had grown as wide as a door. Its bowed shoulders were enormous: the outstretched arms and the hands clasping the handle-bars were those of a giant. Alan wrapped his own arms round Victor's waist: his fingers found the belt of the leather coat and clung to it. He ignored the face that suddenly appeared in the front window. Meg was dressed for bed. Her flannel night-gown was yellowish in colour like Devonshire cream: there was a scorch mark near the neck. She had been crying: it was presumably as a consolation that she had been permitted to watch their departure. She stared through the glass with enigmatic eyes which looked straight into his, but did not acknowledge his presence, as if he were a thousand miles away. She put her thumb into her mouth: the fingers of her other hand made fluttering movements against the base of the thumb.

CHAPTER FIVE

With a roar the motor-bike leaped forward. Alan thought he was going to be torn off. He pressed his body against Victor's, digging his fingers into the belt. He could hardly breathe: his eyes watered, but he dare not snatch them from Victor's broad back. He allowed himself to be sucked into a timeless world of violence. He wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry when, after fifteen minutes or so, during which familiar landmarks streamed past like the flora and fauna of a supernatural landscape, with a final frenzied roar they hurtled down Pretoria Road. The machine uttered one or two growls and coughs as they stopped outside Victor's house. Gradually the trees, lamp-posts, windows, chimneys, which a moment before had been scattered as if by an explosion, came together again. With heroic nonchalance Victor drew off his gauntlet gloves and rose from the saddle. Reluctantly Alan climbed down from the pillion. The noise of wind and engine was still in his ears. He felt as if they had been his element for as long as he could remember, as if they had travelled interminably through time and space.

The houses in front of them were almost identical to those in Majuba Road. Victor's house, however, looked smaller than Alan's by reason of the structure of plywood and corrugated iron which served as garage for Victor's motor-cycle and which occupied most of the front garden. In addition it overshadowed the bay window, making even more gloomy the grimy lace curtains and the aspidistra in its huge green urn – encrusted with knobs and protuberances like a monstrous cottage loaf. Victor's mother was watching them through the leathery leaves

of the plant. She opened the door for them: in Alan's mind this brief circuit from bay window to front door and back symbolised her existence. He supposed she had to step outside it sometimes, but when she did he was sure she hurried back as quickly as possible. Her whole personality was redolent of the dim little front room with its dusty curtains and the aspidistra. She was a broad, unhealthy-looking woman, with a mass of faded auburn hair above a pale creased forehead. Her hands were cold and she kept them tucked into the sleeves of a cardigan of nondescript colour, knitted in such a broad stitch that it had the appearance of a coat of mail. She regarded Alan with a mournful expression and inquired after his family in hushed tones as if expecting the worst: she managed to place a gloomy interpretation upon his reply, sighing deeply and shaking her head.

'Now then, out of the way, Ma!' Victor cried, taking her by the shoulders and pretending to throw her first to one side, then to the other. A faint smile of pleasure touched her features. Victor was the only one who dared - or, it occurred to Alan, who would have wanted - to take such liberties. She returned to the front room, while Victor and Alan continued along the passage. Alan lingered, sniffing inquisitively. It had only recently struck him - in the past he had accepted it unthinkingly - that every family, out of the heart of its intimacy, produced its own distinctive odour. If he had been carried blindfold to the doorway of any house of his acquaintance he could have identified it by a single wrinkling of the nostrils.

They entered the tiny kitchen. The range burned summer and winter, and it was so hot that the room smelt of scorched blacking and furniture polish, and the legs of the Windsor chairs on either side of the range were covered in blisters. Victor led the way into the garden and to the shed at its far end, where he handed Alan over to his father while he went to his bedroom to get ready for the evening's outing.

Alan was convinced that Victor's father spent as much of his life in his shed as his wife did in her front parlour, and that husband and wife hardly ever left the two ends of the house. The shed had pointed eaves and the roof was covered with tarpaulin. It was tarred on the outside, but on the inside the wood was unstained and smelt of the sawmills. The cross-bars were completely unplanned, so that they looked as if they were covered with yellowish fur. A bewildering assortment of objects were nailed to or hung from them – strings of Spanish onions, garden hose, inner tubes of bicycles, pieces of sacking and numerous gardening implements. Most of the ground space was taken up by a vast bench to which were attached so many tool-racks, vices and other gadgets that it looked like a tank, and by a circular stove, its chimney-piece going up through a hole in the roof which was protected by a piece of scorched and crumpled asbestos. A pot of glue stood on the stove. Every now and then it erupted into greenish-brown bubbles. Victor's father was an amiable but utterly silent man. His entertainment was confined to a twinkling of the eyes and one or two grunts. He was bald with the roundest head Alan had ever seen, and a drooping moustache of the same colour and texture as the whiskers on the onions that festooned the rafters. His cheeks and nose were covered with a network of tiny veins so dry that they looked as if they were pencilled on the skin. Alan had the fancy that they must come off every time he towelled his face, like the transfers that he and Meg stuck on their hands and legs.

When Victor reappeared he was wearing his best serge suit. the navy blue had rather a purplish colour. He had a white knitted silk scarf tucked into the revers of his jacket, but parted in order to demonstrate that he was wearing a collar and tie. His father regarded him approvingly. The collar-band of his own shirt was open at the neck. The fact that his son wore a collar and tie – except, of course, when he was relaxing at home at the week-ends – filled him with pride. There was nothing he

liked better than for people to notice the contrast. It was almost as if he exposed his thick neck, its red folds glistening with sweat, by intent, as a proof of successful fatherhood and of the distance he had propelled his son forward.

'I'm taking the nipper out, Dad,' Victor told him. He nodded, his eyes twinkling. 'Do you want me to give you a hand first?' Victor said. He shook his head and, taking up his plane, bent over a piece of wood fastened into one of the vices at the side of the bench. 'My!' said Victor. 'Lovely!' as a long satiny-white shaving curled up, like a wave in reverse.

'Have a fag?' Victor said, holding out a packet of Woodbines. His father took a cigarette and put it behind his ear. His face went a deeper colour and the tiny veins turned brown. He bent lower over his bench to hide his pleasure and pride.

When they left the house Alan was at first rather in awe of his companion. He looked strange with his hair almost black as a result of the lavender-perfumed brilliantine and his figure in the best suit neat and slim after the bulky leather coat. But a moment later Victor quickened his step. He had caught sight of the gang waiting for him under the lamp-post at the corner of the road. Alan's heart began to skip. He was about to be admitted, in however humble a capacity, into this world of the young men, as strange if not as remote as that of the 'real' grown-ups: utterly different, certainly, from that which he and Meg normally inhabited. The sight of Victor's friends, tall, shadowy figures slouching under the gaslight, hands in pockets, cigarettes dangling from the corners of their mouths, momentarily frightened him, and he half wished he was in bed with Meg in the back bedroom of Number Twenty Majuba Road. Especially when, for several seconds, they said nothing at all but eyed Victor, their faces turned at angles, their hands thrust stiffly into their trouser pockets, their cigarettes almost falling out of their down-turned mouths. After what seemed an interminable silence, Tom, Victor's special friend, growled:

'llo, Vic!' A few of the others echoed: 'llo, Vic!' The rest merely grunted. In reply Victor, too, made a throaty growling noise. In some mysterious way this broke the ice: the others gave way a little and allowed him to enter the group.

Alan clung to his hand. He felt like a mushroom among the boles of forest oaks. For several minutes he was ignored. Then Tom jerked his head in his direction and said to Victor: 'See you've brought the young 'un.'

'Huh!' Victor said. There was another silence. Then Tom laid his hand on Alan's shoulder. 'See you behave yourself!' His tone was gruff, but Alan knew his presence had been accepted. Tom felt in his pocket and extracted a winc-gum: it was coated with dust and fluff, but to Alan it tasted like manna.

Suddenly, though no one had spoken, they moved off. Victor kept hold of Alan's hand. Tom walked on the other side, but several feet away as if he didn't really belong. But though each of them walked in this way, hands in pockets, elbows pressed close to the sides, shoulders hunched, as if knitting himself into as compact a unit as possible, it was still a group with an entity all its own. Alan held his head high, especially when they encountered other gangs and slowing down passed them with eyes narrowed, on one occasion going right through them like folk-dancers performing an intricate manoeuvre - except that Tom and one or two of the others went out of their way to collide with their opposite numbers.

Soon they left behind the streets of tightly-packed houses and entered an avenue of chestnut trees. Here the houses stood a long way back and the lamp-posts were few and far between. Each of these illuminated a circle of white blossom and vivid green leaves, but in between the foliage was dark and mysterious, tossing and murmuring like dream-haunted sleepers. Their footsteps echoed on the pavement, their voices sank to whispers. Victor's fingers tightened round Alan's hand: the

gang drew closer together. It was wonderful to be surrounded by these nonchalant young giants, to be in the midst of so much darkness and terror and to be borne triumphantly through it.

At the end the avenue widened out into a square with a lamp-post at each corner. To the left of one of the lamps was a stile which led into the meadows. The lamps lit up a few square yards of grass, making it, as in the case of the foliage of the chestnut trees, look unnaturally green. Beyond that was a band of black shadow, but as they went farther away from the lamps and the lighted windows of the house it could be seen that dusk had not yet completely yielded to night. There was still a large patch of pale green sky unblemished save for a few streaks of brown and orange on the horizon. Bats dipped and weaved across the pale green and one or two late birds were making their way towards the hedgerows and the reeds of the river. The river gave off its evening smell: a cold breath came from it as from an animal getting ready for its nocturnal prowling. And suddenly, emerging from this mist appeared a knot of girls, of ages ranging from fourteen to seventeen: they were running, some hand in hand, others separately, swinging hats and handbags, stumbling in the indistinct hollows – and all it seemed in a state of panic. Alan caught hold of Victor's arm. He expected to see some monstrous emanation of the river pursuing the fleeing figures. But it soon became apparent that there was a theatrical element about their flight. Their screams were ear-splitting, but they climbed in experimental series, one shrill note catching fright from that which preceded it: in some cases the screams were interspersed with giggles. When they saw the gang they redoubled their clamour, dashing past and pretending that they were too frightened to notice them. The gang drew closer together, their fists bunched, and gazed truculently into the twilight. A weird noise caused them to exchange wild glances and produced a fresh peal of screams from the girls. A moment later Greg appeared. He was run-

ning with odd loping strides, leaping up and down, and every now and then jumping to one side like a horse starting at shadows. He had his bugle in his hand, but when he put it to his lips he was too winded to do more than gasp, producing a feeble braying noise. His cap was awry and his forehead glistened with sweat. Victor and his friends unclenched their fists and, shamefaced, put their hands in their pockets. Greg's appearance might have had an intimidating effect upon strangers, but they had all known him since childhood. As for the girls, as long as they could remember he had been a figure of mock terror. To be chased by Greg was like a ceremony of initiation. It was done without rancour on either side, Greg himself entering into the spirit of it, exaggerating the lolling of his head and the rolling of his eyes, grinning in delight as a bunch of girls scattered before him.

On this occasion, however, the presence of the gang introduced a new element. At first Greg was unsuspecting. He stopped when he saw Victor and his friends and forgetting the girls shambled towards them like a dog wagging its tail. The girls came to a halt a few yards farther on: they lifted their heads and emitted a few more screams, like the whinnying of young mares.

'After the girls again, eh?' Victor said menacingly. Greg stopped. He regarded the gang in surprise. 'It's about time you was taught a lesson!' Tom said, with a quick glance in the direction of the girls. Victor disengaged his hand from Alan's and marched up to Greg. Greg flinched and put up his forearm. Victor looked back at his friends appealingly. But with the girls close at hand, linked up prettily now like a daisy-chain, it was impossible for the leader of the gang to draw back. 'Go on, Vic!' they urged him. 'Give 'im a fourpenny one!' 'Show 'im!' 'Push 'is face in!' 'Give 'im something 'e'll remember!' Victor sighed and moved forward, his fist raised. Greg jumped back several feet, stooped, scrabbled at the ground like a frightened

chimpanzee, picked up a handful of earth and threw it half-heartedly in Victor's direction. Victor gratefully accepted the excuse for anger and darted forward. With a wild cry of: 'Oh, me nerves!' Greg leaped into the air, dodging Victor, and set off across the meadow in the direction of the river, making remarkable speed in spite of his shambling gait. 'Go it, Greg! Go it!' the girls chorused. Victor and his friends, outraged as much as anything by this blatant example of feminine inconsistency, set off in pursuit. The girls screeched scornfully after them and then suddenly turned and walked sedately towards the stile.

Everybody had forgotten Alan. At first the chase circled round him. Once Greg doubled back and stood next to him, breathing heavily. His eyes were rolling: his expression was one of bewilderment, but he had forgotten to remove the grin from his face. The gang soon discovered his ruse and came back, looming out of the mist: they nearly knocked Alan over as Greg caught him by the shoulders and adroitly put him in between himself and his pursuers. Soon the shouting died away and the last of the gang disappeared into the mist which was advancing now across the meadow like a roll of cloth. Alan put his hands in his pockets and stared down at the grass where light still lingered. But a moment later a coil of mist appeared at his ankles and there was a sudden chill on his cheek. It was as if the river had put out a finger to touch him. Calling out 'Victor! Victor!', he began to run. He thought he heard Greg's voice to his right, but it must have been the call of a late curlew. He turned in his tracks and tried to find the spot from which he had started. There had been a clump of grass and thistles which he thought he would have no difficulty in recognising. He found he was surrounded by such clumps all apparently identical. He decided to look for the stile and wait there within the comforting glow of the lamps. But he could not find it, and, his teeth chattering now with cold and fright, he began

to run frantically, first in one direction, then in another. A willow tree he had certainly not noticed before loomed out of the dusk, its trunk swelling to twin protuberances, like a double-headed monster. An owl hooted near-by. He ran faster. Suddenly he found that it was no longer soft meadow-grass brushing his legs, but something sharper that creaked and rustled, and a moment later his shoes filled with water and he sank above his ankles in mud. He floundered about aimlessly: he was whimpering as if the sound gave him comfort. Somewhere very close at hand now he could hear the river whispering, and then there was a sudden crashing and leaping as if a large animal was charging at him through the reeds and the mud. He was sure that the river, which at that moment gurgled vindictively, had sent one of its creatures after him, and he let out a shriek. And then he was caught up in Victor's arms and a moment later he was back on firm ground surrounded by the murmur of voices. He clung to the lapels of Victor's jacket: the serge had a comfortable roughness against his legs: the smell of Victor's body and of his brilliantine enfolded him. The others gathered round. 'Hey, there, little 'un!' 'Now then, sonny, keep your pecker up!' 'We're all here now, nipper!' 'Keep your chin up!' 'Don't be a cry-baby!' They ruffled his hair, pinched his cheeks, pretended to pummel him. They turned out their pockets in a search for sweets, tram tickets and cigarette cards. Tom gave him a stub of pencil with an india-rubber top. They tossed him round from one to the other until his fright was thawed out by their rough tenderness. Then with a whoop they set off with him in their midst, taking it in turns to carry him on their shoulders. In this way he was transported from the meadow, down the avenue of chestnuts and back into the streets. His eyes glittered: he was almost feverish with delight. As the gang marched along, swinging arms, squaring shoulders, it seemed to him that it derived its potency from him, that he was its embodiment. When they encountered

the gang which they had passed earlier in the evening he placed his hands on Victor's head and, leaning forward, scowled. And he let out a scornful 'Yah!' when – so it seemed to him – they hurried past with downcast eyes. Mr Huggins, the proprietor of the fish and chip shop, came to the door, his eyes round with concern when he heard the steady, excited hum that denoted a gang at the height of its unity and confidence, though when he caught sight of Alan he exclaimed with evident relief: 'Oh, I see you've got the nipper.' Alan would not at all have minded a fight, himself tossed hither and thither like a blood-stained standard.

They marched into the fish and chip saloon with purposeful tread. Two stragglers from the other gang licked their fingers and scuttled out. It was Victor's turn to pay. 'Fish and chips and pickled onions all round, Grandad!' he cried, slapping two half-crowns on the marble counter. Alan was thrilled to see Victor handling so much money. The others delicately turned away their heads in order to allow him the fullest pleasure from the gesture.

While they were waiting for their orders they leaned their elbows on the counter, keeping a sharp eye on 'Grandad' Huggins to make sure he did not fob them off with inferior pieces of fish. Alan, as their mascot for the evening, was ceremoniously hoisted on to the counter, a jar of pickled onions and a card advertising ginger-beer being cleared for the purpose. He watched 'Grandad' dexterously pick up the slices of fish by whatever appendages still clung to them – his customers would have protested if he had served 'too much fin' – draw them through a tray of batter and fling them into the vat of bubbling fat. When they were settled to his liking he pulled down the zinc cover and pushed up the one next to it to reveal the sizzling mass of golden chips. As he turned them over with a huge fish-slice they spluttered on a more urgent note. When he had finished, he closed that compartment too, and, hands on

hips, surveyed the row of hungry faces. His own face wore a solemn, dignified expression like a clergyman's.

At last the portions, each in its grease-proof bag, which in turn lay upon several thicknesses of newspaper, were ranged along the top of the counter. The fat canisters of salt, with their perforated zinc tops, were passed round. Then came the quart-sized bottle of vinegar. Everybody sniffed keenly at the first squirting of the liquid to make sure that 'Grandad' hadn't watered it. When everybody had applied the salt and vinegar in the correct proportions, the folds of newspaper were quickly swaddled round the grease-proof bags, and they trooped out of the shop.

'There's one thing you've got to say about Grandad,' Victor said a few minutes later when they stood under the lamp-post at the end of Majuba Street—they daren't venture into the 'Road' a few yards away with such plebeian packages—'he *never* gives you stale newspaper.' Reverently they undid the wrappings. 'Old paper lets in the cold much quicker,' Tom agreed, sucking the tips of his fingers which he had burned by plunging them too carelessly into his piece of fish. 'An' then,' Victor added, holding aloft a chip a good six inches long, '*fresh* newspaper keeps in the flavour.'

'An' brings out the vinegar, nice and sharp like,' Tom said.

Alan sat on the kerb to eat his own fish and chips. When he had finished, a bonus came his way in the form of the 'tiddlers' left in the corners of the grease-proof bags: by the time he had extracted all the crisp, greasy crumbs and splinters he was feeling full, and the sight of the pickled onion which Victor handed him as 'afters' made him retch slightly. He took out his handkerchief, found a reasonably clean corner and, tying the onion in it, returned it to his pocket. He leaned against the lamp-post and fell into a half-dozz while his stomach dealt with the fish and chips. The others were silent. The single cigarette which

was all that remained was passed round: each of them in turn took two or three puffs, hollowing his cheeks and emitting the smoke in long gasps. When the cigarette had burned low it was stuck on a pin^{so} that it could be enjoyed to the last shred.

Alan was snatched awake by a sound that had often ravished him as he lay in the bedroom at Number Twenty Majuba Road: a sound that breathed of the comradeship of the twilight streets, and of the time when he, too, would belong to it. It was the first notes of a mouth-organ. One of the members of the gang had taken it from his breast-pocket and was drawing it tentatively across his lips. After a few experimental chords he began to play 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'. His hands, cupping the mouth-organ, moved as if he were modelling clay: every now and then the fingers of his left hand fluttered like a pigeon struggling to escape. His eyes regarded his audience through the space between his hands and the peak of his cap. They held their breath and listened devoutly. When he had finished and received his round of applause, Tom took out his mouth-organ: it was an elaborate affair with three layers like a huge ice-cream wafer and several stops on its gleaming summit which gave out bell-notes when they were pressed. He played 'Home, Sweet Home', and followed it with 'The Bluebells of Scotland'. He, too, was warmly applauded, but everybody was beginning to show signs of impatience, and at last Victor stepped closer to the light and a gasp of anticipation ran round the gang. First of all he produced a slim gilt instrument which produced a clear, reed-like note. Then he took out an even smaller one, so small that he could get the whole of it inside his mouth. They held their breath while, like a cat teasing a bird, he managed to extract a thin but flawless rendering of 'Loch Lomond'. But these were only tricks, and soon Tom called out: 'C'mon, Vic - how about givin' Betsy an airing?' 'Betsy! We want Betsy!' they chorused. Victor carefully cleaned the two mouth-organs with a piece of chamois leather

and returned them to their cases. Then he took out 'Betsy', his favourite, a long, slender instrument backed with ivory, for whose sake he had given up cigarettes and most other luxuries for over a year. He balanced it in the palm of his hands for several seconds, then with a sweeping gesture carried it up to his mouth and began to play. There was absolute stillness as he went through the opening items of his repertoire. There was a long sigh when, after taking the instrument out of his mouth and shaking it, he again made that sweeping gesture as he brought it to his lips and began to play the piece with which he always concluded - 'There's a Long, Long Trail.' Alan hummed the words: the song was a favourite at home. The plaintive notes rose into the dusky air: the golden circle in which they were clustered seemed inviolate, an island cut off from the whole city. The occasional swish of a passing car and a cacophony of voices from the back streets as the pubs closed went unnoticed. And the whole of Majuba Street, and Majuba Road beyond, respected the occasion. A window was pushed open stealthily: here and there people sat on their doorsteps or stood at their gates: in the distance an old soldier began to hum the tune with a depth of sadness. But no one would have dreamed of encroaching upon the private mystery that belonged to the young men alone. Even the passing lovers, their tranced eyes interlocked, avoided the golden circle of gas-light, though they blundered into everything else.

As the last note died away everybody stood silent. Victor knew this was homage more precious than applause. Then behind them someone coughed and closed a window. The spell was broken. Victor returned the mouth-organ to its case, hoisted Alan on to his shoulders and led the way out of the circle of lamp-light.

Just beyond it they came upon Greg. He was standing, mouth open, head thrust forward. Although they knew that he often crept up on them in order to hear Victor's playing, there was a

murmur of voices as they remembered the incident in the meadows. 'Oh, leave him alone!' Victor said. 'What's up, Vic?' Tom asked. 'I wish I hadn't lammed him,' he muttered. They looked at each other sheepishly.

Most of the gang were neighbours, and as they came to their respective houses they called out 'Good night!' and left. At last only Tom – who lived some distance away – Victor and Alan were left. As they approached the Travers' house they saw Greg standing at the gate. Victor slowed down. Greg got ready to make a dash for his door. Victor fumbled in his pocket. He produced a sixpence and handed it to Greg. 'Get yourself a packet of fags,' Victor said gruffly. Greg snatched at the coin and backed away. 'And mind you lay off the girls!' Victor admonished.

'Mind what he says!' Tom added sternly. Greg grinned and darted into his house. 'You didn't lam him all that hard,' Tom assured Victor.

Victor deposited Alan at the gate of his house. 'Enjoy yourself, nipper?' he asked. Alan's heart was too full of words. Victor and Tom strode off together. Alan let himself in. The passage was in darkness and so was the front room. But there was a splinter of light at the bottom of the middle room door – it flickered as if it was an overflow of energy. He stood listening. At the first murmur he knew exactly who was present. He strained his ears to catch the precise blend of voices. Just as the smell of the passage possessed a background which never altered, but against which temporary odours – a new article of clothing, a visitor, an experiment in cooking, or an illness – disposed themselves in different patterns, so the conversation of the family had its underlying *continuo* enlivened by a variety of changes of key and intonation. He pushed the door open a few inches.

'Oh, he's not a bad chap,' he heard his father say.

'He's got a bit of go in him, anyway,' Uncle Ernest agreed.

'Yes,' Aunt Glad said tartly, 'but there's *something* in what Mother says.'

'Oh, I'm not denying it.'

'He didn't treat our Cora right, whatever you say.'

'I never said . . .'

'Oh yes, you did!'

'But I didn't!'

'I know you men!'

'Now then, Glad,' Alan's father interposed pacifically, 'Ern only said he had plenty of "go" in him.'

'That's right, you stuck up for him.' Aunt Glad always spoke mildly to her brother. It was odd, Alan reflected, that she should express affection by such different tones of voice: he knew that her spurts of exasperation against her husband had no real enmity

'I *told* her - I told her right from the start' - the low murmur came from his grandmother - "'You look out!" I told her. "I know his kind!"'

'Big and bouncing,' Aunt Glad agreed.

'With those knowing ways of his,' came the slower, slightly sorrowful sound of his mother's voice.

'And all that swagger'

'And the way he talks.'

'Oh, he can *talk* big!'

'I can't understand you two,' Uncle Ernest interrupted. 'You spend all day chin-wagging about his letter, you'll fall over backwards to make him welcome - oh yes, you will! I can see you . . .'

'Baking and cleaning and polishing,' Alan's father said in a tone of voice that suggested that he felt he ought to lend his brother-in-law support, but was somewhat apprehensive about doing so. Uncle Ernest must have backed another winner and bought a fresh supply of cider.

'Yes, *we* know what to expect,' he went on recklessly. "'Take

your feet off the fender!" . . . "Blow your nose!" . . . "Don't you *dare* take your collar off!" . . . – he hissed these injunctions in a tolerable imitation of his wife's voice – "Pass the bread and butter!" . . . "Get the ash-tray!" . . . "Use your *serviette!*"

'He does *know* how to behave!' his wife broke in furiously.

'Oh, he has good manners!' Alan's mother agreed enthusiastically.

'Yes,' her mother-in-law said with a sigh, in which Alan detected gratification, 'he is a gentleman. I have to say it – poor Cora chose a *gentleman*.'

Mrs Blount's contralto chimed in for the first time – as a crony of Aunt Glad's she was counted as practically a member of the family: 'What *did* he do to Cora?' she asked: her voice vibrated a little. 'I never exactly heard. . . .' There was a pause. Then Alan heard his grandmother's long-drawn sigh.

'There were incidents,' she said.

'Yes, "incidents".' Excited by the unfamiliar word, Alan's mother seized upon it eagerly. 'You know!' she said, with a significant lowering of the voice. Mrs Blount said nothing.

'Well – "You know what sailors are!"' Uncle Ernest cried, half singing. There was a frosty silence, followed by a gulping noise as he took refuge in his mug of cider.

'Cora was on *her death-bed*,' his wife said, pronouncing each word with emphasis as if by this time even a person of her husband's grossness must be brought to a sense of shame.

'You know what I mean,' he muttered. 'All that gadding backwards and forwards across the Irish Sea. Here one day, in foreign parts the next!'

'We do *not* know what you mean, Ernest,' his mother-in-law told him.

'The bother with Hector,' Alan's father said, 'is that he's his own worst enemy.' There was a respectful silence as they savoured this pronouncement.

'That's it!' Uncle Ernest said admiringly. 'He doesn't know when to stop. But he's got spunk.'

'He hasn't much sense of *responsibility* – but he's got charm,' Aunt Glad said.

'You can't trust him – but you've got to admit that he's a gentleman,' her mother contributed.

'He . . . he . . .' Alan's mother began, her voice trembling, 'he's weak . . . but he's *fascinating*!' She spoke as if she was using a dirty word. Mrs Blount was still silent.

But Alan had lost patience. He had spent several enchanted hours in the company of Victor and his friends. He had no wish to be caught up in the world of the grown-ups even though he saw through the open slit of the door that the route to the corner by the bamboo table was temptingly free. Suddenly he wanted to return to his own sphere. He pushed open the door and entered. He endured the exclamations as to the lateness of his return, the speculations as to the unsuitable 'antics' he had been up to, and the inquiries into the state of his digestion. He submitted to the rapid washing and brushing, the tucking into bed and the good-night embraces. When his mother had gone he sat up in bed and looked about him. The blind was drawn over the dormer window. It was so threadbare that the light of moon and stars penetrated it and the tiny holes themselves looked like stars, so that the whole blind became a miniature constellation. He could just make out the flash of Molly's bare arm and the glitter of the metal curlers in her hair. She was breathing evenly and dreaming of something pleasant, for suddenly she gave a tender laugh.

Meg opened her eyes. 'You're late.'

'Yes.'

'Where's you been?'

'Out with Victor. Don't you remember?'

'I've remember!' She tried to revive her sense of grievance and gave a stifled wail.

'I've brought something for you,' Alan told her. 'Something to eat,' he added hastily in case she should jump to extravagant conclusions.

'Show me!' Meg sat up in the bed.

Alan leaned out and took his trousers from the bedside chair and extracted his handkerchief. He unknotted the pickled onion and gave it to Meg. She took it and examined it carefully, holding it close to her eyes. Then she put it in her mouth. She ate with deliberation, chewing for several minutes and swallowing very slowly. 'Nice!' she said. She held out her face. In the dark he missed her lips. The warm blob of her mouth met his nose. 'Nice!' she said again and immediately fell asleep. The murmur of the grown-ups getting ready for bed came to him. Behind it he seemed to hear the gruff voices of Victor and the gang. He thrust them both aside. The pin-points of gold twinkled on the dark-green blind. Tonight he would not have minded if the room had been completely wrapped in darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

'Expect me late Monday or Tuesday. Regards, Hector.' The telegram produced less excitement than it would have done in ordinary circumstances. It was the day of the annual agricultural show at Denton, a hill-top village about five miles from Cranwyck. One of the items was the contest for the Denton Jumping Cup. Uncle Ernest was a regular competitor. Silver cups formed the staple ornament of the middle room and were used as receptacles for buttons, pins, pipe-cleaners, spills and other odds and ends; rosettes, blue, yellow and red, were common playthings for the children. This year Uncle Ernest had particularly high hopes because he was riding Firefly.

The household had been astir since six o'clock. As usual there was some doubt as to whether Alan and his parents would accompany the others. Alan's father was always dreaming of peaceful week-ends: his mother didn't altogether approve of 'outings'. She had got up at the same time as the others, but this, she argued, was because it was impossible to go on sleeping 'with all that hullabaloo'. Her intention, she announced to Alan and his father, was to lend her presence as a spur so that they might be 'left in peace' as soon as possible. She never ceased to marvel at the fact that, in spite of her determination to stand firm, at the last minute her family were nearly always swept into the party assembling in the middle room. Only once had she succeeded in getting her own way. Alan shuddered at the memory. Particularly painful had been the moment when the three of them sat in the front room and listened to the uproar as friends and relatives gathered on the pavement outside the house and sorted themselves out into the vehicles that were to transport them to the Show. The gaiety outside had seemed redoubled now that, having done everything in their

power to persuade the occupants of the front room to join them, the others were absolved from further effort. Alan and his father had felt as the officers of a ship must feel when they have been marooned on a desert island by a mutinous but infectious jolly crew. The fact that the one member of the crew who remained loyal let out a yell when she realised that he was staying behind only increased his misery. His mother had uttered an exaggerated sigh – ‘Ah, the house to ourselves – *at last!*’

They had sat listlessly for several minutes while the silence deepened around them like a fall of snow. ‘Stop your snivelling!’ his father had exclaimed, although all he had done had been to sigh through his nostrils. Stung by the injustice he had begun to snivel in earnest, and his father, bouncing up from his chair, had boxed his ears and hurried out to the lavatory to read the newspaper. Although shaken by this rare display of anger on her husband’s part, Alan’s mother had remained grimly cheerful. She had made them come for a long walk, pointing out objects of interest on the way and keeping up a flow of bright conversation. In the afternoon she had organised a ‘select’ outing of their own to a near-by beauty spot, little frequented by vulgar holiday crowds. She had insisted that they wear their best clothes in order to set this holiday apart from all others. It had been a hot day and Alan had felt half suffocated in a new white jersey with a high collar and he had upset his mother by getting a green streak on it. They had had tea in a half-deserted restaurant: in desperation his father had spent more than he could afford on ice-creams and cakes. He had also made a mistake about the times of the buses, and they had had to walk back. They had arrived home dusty and exhausted. His mother’s patience had finally broken and Alan had been packed off to bed for ‘grizzling’. The evening had seemed interminable as he had lain awake listening for the return of the party from the Denton Show. And when they had

arrived, long after dark, Meg had been too tired to answer his questions. She had regarded him with glittering but far-away eyes, and he had had to let her burrow her flushed face into his shoulder and fall asleep. The calves of her legs had been as hard as stones: what excitements had brought her to such a pitch of exhaustion he would never know.

This year Alan's ~~h~~nother had an additional argument against joining the outing.

'Ernest is riding Firefly,' she reminded her husband.

'Well?'

'I've told you before: I don't like the way he got that horse!'

'No . . . I know what you mean. . . . But I don't think Glad would have let him do anything *really* wrong. . . .'

'H'm! It seems very fishy to me. You know how sarky that captain was at the Remount Depot. We haven't heard the last of it. Ernest will live to regret it – you mark my words!'

Alan's father looked worried. 'But I don't see . . .'

'Don't you? *I* do! We oughtn't to encourage him. That's what we shall be doing if we watch the Denton Cup!'

But it was at this moment that the telegram had arrived. Alan's grandmother was in the middle room and it was only natural that the discussion should take place there. Aunt Glad propped it against the clock on the mantelpiece so that she could brood over it, as with sleeves rolled up above the elbows she continued to make sandwiches.

'Well, it says Monday – or Tuesday. Shall we risk it?' she asked her husband. Bent over a crate counting the bottles of beer and stout, he did not answer. 'You!' she cried, slapping the expanse of riding breeches with the flat of the bread-knife.

'You know I've got to go, Glad,' he replied.

Molly hustled in from the kitchen with a plate of cakes she had just baked. 'What's all this?' she cried. Meg, realising from the tone of her voice that the outing had been put in jeopardy began to wail. Her mother mechanically thrust one of the cakes

into her mouth.

'What do you think, Lil?'

'Somebody ought to stay in,' her sister-in-law agreed. 'As a matter of fact we had already decided . . .' Alan's heart sank, but at that moment there was a rat-tat-tat at the front door, the joyous holiday knocking that sounded different from any other. Aunt Glad laid down the bread-knife and dashed into the passage. Molly followed.

'Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!' they heard Great-uncle Charlie's booming voice.

'He's got a car!' Molly shouted, rushing back into the middle room.

Everybody hurried outside. A car was still a rarity in Majuba Road – at any rate a car that actually stopped outside one of the houses and didn't belong to the doctor. A crowd of children gathered round. The cousin from Canada to whom Great-uncle Charlie had given a lift was sitting in the seat next to the driver's.

'What do you think of her?' Great-uncle Charlie shouted, slapping the mudguard so that the whole machine rattled. 'Hired her for the day.'

'I bet that cost you a pretty penny,' Uncle Ernest said admiringly.

'I'm going shares with Mr and Mrs Blount,' Great-uncle Charlie explained. 'They'll be over in a minute. . . . But isn't she a beauty? Morris Cowley – none of your common Fords!'

They stared at the ungainly mass of mud-coloured metal with its bulbous upholstery and its beetle-head of a bonnet, and agreed that she *was* a beauty. Alan and Meg climbed on to the running-board and played with the horn which was as big as a football. Then they climbed into the back seat: it looked like a vast Chesterfield fastened on as an afterthought. The cousin from Canada whispered something in Great-uncle Charlie's ear. 'Good idea!' he said, and turning to the children shouted:

'Well? How would you like to come with us?' Alan and Meg hung their heads. Great-uncle Charlie looked hurt. 'A ride in a car!' he boomed. '*Educational!*'

Alan's mother came to the rescue. 'They always go in the trap,' she explained.

'Trap!' Great-uncle Charlie snorted. 'Can't understand it! This is an experience!' and he slapped the mudguard again.

Alan heaved a sigh of relief. The ride in the trap was one of the main sources of enjoyment on these occasions. Moreover, his mother had practically committed herself. She followed her sister-in-law into the middle room and joined her in a last furious onslaught on the sandwiches, helped pack the baskets and brown-paper carriers and even accepted a glass of stout. The telegram on the mantelpiece was forgotten.

A few minutes later the rattle of wheels, the pop-popping of a motor-bike and a knock on the front door were all heard simultaneously. 'It's the trap!' Alan and Meg shouted.

'It's Victor!' Molly screamed.

'It's the Blounts,' Great-uncle Charlie said in a respectful voice.

The baskets, bags, raincoats and crates of beer and stout were snatched up. They advanced along the passage and flung open the front door. Along the kerb were ranged the pony and trap which one of the Guv'nor's men had driven over, Victor standing astride his motor-bike, and the Morris Cowley with Mr and Mrs Blount already ensconced in the back seat. Mrs Blount was wearing a flowered silk dress with a neckline that revealed her naked-looking collar-bones, and a large straw hat. She carried a vanity bag with long straps and a parasol. Her husband wore a light suit, a Panama hat and brown and white shoes: he had gold-rimmed spectacles and carried a malacca cane. He looked elegant in spite of the illness which was making it increasingly difficult for him to get about: the doctors thought this illness might be sleepy sickness. The Blounts received the

admiration of the onlookers without vanity. In a neighbourhood like Majuba Road there was always a 'superior couple' just as there was always a rackety family like the Travers: they accepted their rôle as part of the natural order of things. They did not act as a damper on proceedings: on the contrary they contributed piquancy to them.

Victor obligingly swung the starting handle of the car. After several attempts the motor started up, Victor handed the starting-handle to the cousin from Canada, Great-uncle Charlie raised one gauntleted hand in a majestic salute and the car drew away from the kerb, slowly and, in spite of its bulk, with a surprisingly stately motion, like a swan.

When they had waved it out of sight the grown-ups, Alan and Meg climbed into the trap. It was a cross between a buggy and a governess cart, peculiar to that part of the country. On the raised front seat, which had a bar across the back, Uncle Ernest sat with the reins and Aunt Glad beside him. Alan's parents and grandmother sat on the seat which ran round three sides of the well. Alan and Meg squeezed themselves on to the floor.

Molly and Victor were going on the motor-bike. Molly had run back into the house to fetch her purse. 'Make sure the gas is turned off in the oven!' her mother called after her.

'All right, Mum!' Molly's voice came back faintly.

There was a muffled banging of doors. These sounds, muted by distance and the emptiness of the house, set the atmosphere for a phenomenon that Alan had begun to notice with increasing frequency – the way in which at moments of domestic drama the whole scene would suddenly crystallise. The sun, which had grown hotter in the last few seconds as if it had thrown off its coat, stared down unwinkingly. Percy, the old horse, stood between the shafts, his head drooping as if he never expected to move. The rustlings and creaking of the grown-ups as they arranged their belongings and settled them-

selves seemed as if they would go on for ever. Victor, standing astride his motor-bicycle, staring at the door of the house, seemed frozen into immobility. Molly, still pulling out drawers and slamming doors would, Alan felt, never emerge. The clucking of the hens in the Travers' back yard, the barking of a dog in the distance, the sounds of preparation for the 'holiday outing' in dozens of homes all along Majuba Road, the knots of children waiting at their gates in sailor suits and clean white dresses, carrying baskets, butterfly-nets, buckets and spades, Mrs Cowcher regarding them from behind the curtains of her front window, Mr Poole with his gloomy dark-coloured face, dressed in black, prayer-book and Bible in hand, leading his posse of daughters in their old-fashioned clothes – long skirts, black woollen stockings, and wide-brimmed straw hats above sad faces like triangles of white paper – all the sights and sounds of Majuba Road had become a peep-show that would go on presenting its set-piece for ever. And then everything changed. Uncle Ernest twitched the reins, Percy lifted his head and started forward. 'See that she locks the door!' Aunt Glad called back and Victor turned his head and laughed: Mr Poole and his daughters passed through their gate: Mrs Cowcher left her place at the window. The scene had moved out of its groove.

Meg loved the tiny square well among the legs of the grown-ups. To his surprise Alan found that he had difficulty with his knees. There was something ugly and distasteful in the discovery. He switched his mind quickly to the small pleasures of the trap which only a year ago had been utterly satisfying.

The floor was covered with coconut-matting, thick and prickly like a hedgehog: it quickly reddened the insides of their legs. The sides were upholstered in bottle-green leather. There was a distinctive odour, compounded of human smells and the acrid tang of horse sweat acting upon polished harness. But it was the motion of the trap that formed its special appeal. No other ride was quite like it. In train or bus or tram the thinness

of the partition that separated their hurtling bodies from the road or track beneath had often appalled him. In the trap this awareness was even more urgent, because of the shaking, sideways movement which rattled them to and fro like peas in a colander. When Percy broke into a gallop their bodies were held against the floor as by a giant's palm and in their minds' eye they saw the road streaming along a fraction of an inch away. When the wheels caught in the tramlines there was a dreadful grinding noise and a lurching sensation as if an earthquake had broke around them. They clutched at each other, half in laughter, half in panic. They enjoyed the sharp alternations of terror and peace. They were like twin kernels inside a nut tossing and swaying at the end of a flimsy branch suspended over a void.

But Alan's pleasure was accompanied by a pang. In some obscure way it was associated with the fact that he had allowed himself to stop and think. He had named the pleasure and this aroused a feeling of guilt and a fear that in doing so he had marked the beginning of its fading. It occurred to him that during the past year he had been driven, one after another, from a number of these enclosed areas—corners of rooms, cupboards, spaces under chairs and tables and beds—which only a few months before had been worlds to cherish and explore. As these had dwindled, so too had his capacity to derive joy from their distinctive features—a knot in the skirting-board, the corpse of a spider, a particle of fluff.

They were a quarter of the way to Denton before Victor, with a honk from his horn and a bang from the exhaust, swept past them. Molly, her arms round his waist, her body curled to his contours like a caterpillar on a leaf, cautiously turned her face to flash them a smile, half frightened, half exultant. 'The little minx!' Aunt Glad exclaimed wrathfully. 'She's changed into that dress!' Earlier in the morning there had been an argument about a new dress which Molly had bought at the Universal

Stores. It was a modern dress with a short skirt and no sleeves. 'You are to take it back,' her mother had told her.

'But, Mum, it's fashionable!' Molly had wailed.

'Don't care! It's indecent.'

'But I got it half price and it's only ever so slightly shop-soiled!'

'If you wear that dress I shall disown you!'

Molly had apparently given in.

'How dare you go behind my back!' her mother shouted after her, 'I'll give you what for!' And as they began to overhaul the motor-bike which had slowed down to negotiate a tramcar she stood up in her seat and brandished her fist. Molly looked back over her shoulder: She tugged at her skirt: in her pinkish-white lisle stockings her knees looked plump and childish. The motor-bike roared away again just as they were about to draw level. At the same moment a wheel of the trap caught in a tramline and Aunt Glad sat down with a bump. A group of young men on top of the tram cheered. Aunt Glad was sufficiently imbued with the holiday spirit to manage a grim smile: her husband had the good sense to keep a straight face.

When they reached the foot of Denton Hill, Percy slowed down to a walk. A few yards farther on he stopped, at exactly the same spot as he had done the previous year. Alan recognised it by the scrap of an old poster on a near-by telegraph pole. Perhaps Percy used the same means of identification. He waited until the men had got out of the trap, then continued on his way, shafts and harness creaking. Two hundred yards farther on he stopped again and the remaining passengers got out. Alan and Meg loved this last steep climb, as they walked beside Percy listening to his patient breathing while his short bushy tail made a circular movement like an egg-whisk. His coat was light brown, but the sweat turned it a chocolate colour: the smell too was like that of bitter chocolate. It blended pleasantly with that of the road. This had been recently repaired and the tar had

melted in the sunshine, showing glossy in between the newly-laid chips of yellow stone on which their feet kept slipping.

Suddenly Percy turned to the right and entered an enclosure. This was labelled 'Car Park', but in fact there were as many horse-drawn vehicles as cars, though they were proud to see Great-uncle Charlie's hired Morris Cowley squatting on the concrete like a dun-coloured hip-bath. The Guv'nor spotted them as soon as they entered the ground. He had brought Firefly in the horse-box earlier in the morning. 'How is she?' his son asked.

The Guv'nor shrugged his shoulders. 'She's touchy.'

'What's the matter with her?'

'She's come to the conclusion that she doesn't like being stuck on top of a hill. Feels she's being made a monkey of!'

Uncle Ernest hurried off to see for himself. With a rare show of cordiality the Guv'nor held out his hands to the children, tucking his riding-crop under his arm. He was wearing breeches of pale-grey checks and an old-fashioned riding coat buttoned high on his chest: a grey silk stock was at his throat. A cap of the same material as his breeches was perched exactly on top of his bony head with its thin silver hair: his boots were like polished velvet. The glass eye gave him an aristocratic air, probably because when he tilted his head it caught the sun so that it was reminiscent of a monocle. 'Distinguished but *rakish*,' was the summing-up of Alan's mother.

Now they were on Denton Hill they realised how stuffy it was down in the valley with its frequent thunderstorms and river smells. Here there was a fresh breeze: it ran like a comb through the jade-green grass where it was still untrodden at the sides of the tents. All around them was an expanse of blue sky. It spread so high and so wide that it produced a breathless feeling of beauty combined with nausea. Alan and Meg had a sneaking feeling of sympathy for Firefly.

There was almost as much gold as blue. There was the fierce

ball of the sun from which they flinched as from a clenched fist: the rays leaped from it like spears or rained down like animated golden-chain. Denton Hill rose out of the valley like a watch-tower. And all the curving tiers and terraces, bays and alcoves of the amphitheatre were filled with grain. There were cornfields of all shapes and sizes, some burrowing into the sides of Denton Hill, others lying flat against the slopes of the valley like golden handkerchiefs laid out to dry, so precariously that Alan expected to see the sheaves stacked in them come tumbling down in a golden harvest. Where the harvesting had already commenced the sunlight glinted pale yellow among the stubble. By contrast the wedges of standing corn turned a deeper colour—sometimes coppery, sometimes orange, and sometimes a toasted golden-brown like Demarara sugar. In other places the swaying masses of untouched corn shone like soft unalloyed gold.

This light against the vast unwinking background of blue invested the show-ground with an atmosphere of unreality, picking out the exhibits as if they were pieces of sculpture in a gallery and invading every nook and cranny like an army of locusts. It leaped and flickered on the uplifted metal of the agricultural machines so that the spectators had to shield their eyes. It formed gold flecks on the crusts of cottage loaves, on the newly-baked cakes, on the jars of honey and in the depths of the butter churns. The ruby red of the Herefords, the mahogany of the carthorses—like dark and tawny port—held the glint of the sun. The hair of the goats was sprinkled with long gleaming threads like golden wire. The pale yellow of the stubble fields was repeated in the straw of the pens, in the silky fetlocks of the horses, in the fleeces of sheep, which had been washed until they themselves looked like soap-suds, and in the primrose shirt-fronts of the collie dogs.

If they went on walking, Alan thought, as they threaded their way through the lanes of exhibits, they would walk straight out

into the illimitable expanse of blue and gold. He was reminded of the Harvest Thanksgiving Service which was close at hand. The show-ground now had something of the appearance of an altar. The agricultural implements and animals, the stalls of fruit and vegetables and farm produce and no less the people passing in and out amongst them, enclosed in this big field which occupied almost the whole of the flat-top of Denton Hill, seemed to be lifted up like an offering to the dome of the sky which, as the sun reached its zenith, deepened to amethyst and topaz.

Alan's grandmother demanded a cup of tea. The Guv'nor led the way to the red-striped marquee, as big as a cathedral. He left them at the entrance because he wanted to find out how Uncle Ernest was getting on with Firefly. His hand, when he disengaged it from Alan's, was as cool and dry as when they had set out. Inside the tent they saw Mr and Mrs Blount, who had not completed the tour of the ground. Mrs Blount waved and they sat down beside her at one of the trestle tables. Her dress had wilted in the heat: there were red patches on her neck. Mr Blount sat close up to the tables as if he needed to prop himself against it. Great-uncle Charlie, Alan's father and the cousin from Canada – who was explaining that he had accidentally come out without any money – joined the queues for refreshments. The rest of them slumped thankfully on the benches. They were dazed by the heat and the uproar. Blasts of even hotter air reached them every now and then from the great copper tea-urns. The tables were littered with empty cups, plates, and cake papers. Puffs of steam rose from the places where tea had been spilled. There were oily patches on the tables where butter had melted. Crumbs toasted almost as soon as they fell. Bad-tempered wasps hovered over the debris. Across the grass, paths, like sheep runs, had formed: firmly trodden where they led to the row of trestle tables that served as counter, fainter in between the separate tables. Along the edge of the

marquee the grass was still long but it drooped in the heat, giving off the strong scent of hay that has been too quickly baked. The canvas walls were hot to the touch: they bellied inwards, heavy with the rays of the sun.

At last the men returned and soon the table was enveloped in the fumes of the treacle-dark tea, served in cups so thick that that they might have been hacked from a quarry. The slices of bread-and-butter curled before they could get them to their mouths: the butter soaked into the bread like olive oil. Even the slices of fruit cake turned hard at the edges before they were consumed.

Molly and Victor appeared out of the queue. They sat down before Aunt Glad remembered Molly's misdemeanour. She put down her cup with a bang.

'How *dare* you disobey me?'

'Sorry, Mum.'

'Sorry indeed! Sneaking back into the house the moment my back's turned!'

'But Mum, I had *paid* for the dress!'

'The *deceit* of it!'

'It was my fault, really,' Victor interposed. He flinched as Aunt Glad rounded on him.

'Mind your own business! It's nothing to do with you.' But she gave him an approving look.

'I won't do it again, Mum,' Molly pleaded.

'The very idea! And *look* at the sight of you!'

Molly wriggled inside her dress in an attempt to make it look longer. Alan noticed that there was a criss-cross pattern on one knee where she had been kneeling in the grass. 'Come on, Mum,' she said. 'Let's be friends!'

'Don't you think you can come smarming round me, my girl,' and snatching up her handbag, Aunt Glad stalked out of the tent: a wasp that had been reconnoitring the side of her nose followed with an indignant buzz.

They trooped out of the marquee after her. She led the way to the enclosure where the horse-show was being held. It was surrounded by walls of canvas. Here too the sun beat through the stitches, causing small explosions of light and turning the canvas into cloth of gold. The stakes from which it was suspended and the stands were of new unpainted wood the colour of butter. Aunt Glad proudly displayed the tickets that admitted them to the grandstand reserved for friends and relations of the competitors. They watched the preliminary items: a performance by the band of the Yeomanry; a parade of cart-horses, rosettes on their foreheads, ribbons of red, white and blue twisted into their tails, led by a huge 'shire' like a dappled battleship; a display of trotting; a competition for the most graceful lady rider; competitions for the best-kept pony and the smartest trap; and a fancy-dress parade of 'historical equestrian subjects' in which the grey shire horse reappeared with his owner's daughter perched on his back – it was broad enough for her whole family – dressed in a cardboard suit of armour and representing Joan of Arc.

At last the contest for the Denton Cup was announced. In previous years Alan and Meg hadn't been able to make head or tail of the proceedings. Meg had lost all interest when she had realised that the water-jump was a fraud. She had watched a competitor land square in the middle and scramble out with no more damage than a flurry of spray: she had confidently expected to see horse and rider disappear from view. The contest had been one of those noisy chaoses in which adults loved to involve themselves and to which they insisted on dragging their children. But to his surprise Alan found his interest quicken. One more area of confusion had begun to clear. It was as if a glass panel had been let into a door so that the room beyond was revealed. Farther on, he knew, lay many others: the thought both excited and appalled him.

Firefly made several faultless rounds. The adults applauded.

Aunt Glad enacted every movement. As Uncle Ernest approached each jump she gathered herself at the edge of her seat, clenched every muscle and at the crucial moment uncurled her body and thrust forward the hand that held her programme. It was continually hitting people in front of her and her exhortations were interspersed with apologies uttered in her politest grandstand manner. 'Come on, Ernie! Nearly! Nearly there! Get ready! . . . Now! Up! Up! . . . Oh, I *do* beg your pardon. . . . Careful now! Careful does it! Don't rush at it, you fool! Just like you to make a mess of it! . . . Pardon me. . . . Ahhh! That's it! Over you go! Up! . . . I'm very sorry, I do assure you. . . .' When the excitement became too intense Alan turned his head away and watched Aunt Glad instead of the arena.

After yet another flawless round there was applause all over the ground. Aunt Glad drew herself up and smiled benevolently at her fellow-spectators. 'Look at her! She's a beauty!' somebody exclaimed near-by. 'And what about the man on her back?' Aunt Glad remarked loudly.

But there was no doubt about it that Firefly *was* a beauty. It was wonderful to see her soar over the jumps, her forelegs held in front of her like the folded paws of a cat, her hind legs flaring out behind her and her tail floating away with a nonchalant effect and yet powerfully as if it were a kind of parachute. Uncle Ernest's body crouched forward in the saddle seemed to have no substance: it rose as Firefly rose, as if it were part of her own mane lifting with the speed of her motion. But Alan could see that all was not well. In between rounds Firefly kept jerking her head and mincing from side to side, kneading the square of grass on which she stood like a cat treading down a cushion. Then when Uncle Ernest let her go she shot forward as if packing all her exasperation and fury into the hurtling of her body. It was impossible for her to be anything but graceful but there was an excess of energy in the way she hurled herself

at the jumps. It was as if she wanted to tear them apart and consume them. She had conceived a particular loathing for the wall. She charged at it with a blind look as if pretending it wasn't there so that the spectators rose in their seats. Then at the very last moment she flung herself upwards with such an explosion of violence that it hurt to watch. She seemed to be seeking to disintegrate herself like a bursting shell against the thin blue atmosphere she hated.

Her nearest rival was a big chestnut. He was clumsy in appearance and style, with an odd little kick of his far hind leg every time he cleared a jump. Every time the crowd laughed he swished his tail to show that he appreciated the joke. His name was Cherry Boy, but everybody insisted in inserting an extra 'e' into his name, pronouncing it 'Cheery Boy'.

Gradually all the horses were eliminated except these two. The simpler jumps were removed and the obstacles raised, including an additional bar at the water-jump and another row of bricks on top of the wall. Firefly seemed to know exactly what the men working at the jumps were up to: she pranced and rolled her eyes more angrily than ever.

Cherry Boy, after one or two droll skips and a flourish of his tail, set off on his round. He cleared the first two jumps easily. At the third there was the faintest click and the topmost bar quivered. His rider looked back over his shoulder. Cherry Boy was put off his stride. But by a series of prances in which he raised his forelegs high so that he looked like a rocking-horse going back on its rollers, he regained his impetus and made a mighty effort at the water-jump. One of his hooves touched the top of the hedge with a sound like the swishing of a broom, but he managed to get across. He waved his tail in response to the applause and completed the rest of the course without difficulty. Firefly then went round in her usual contemptuous manner—though again she showed uneasiness at the wall.

The jumps were raised once more and this time as Cherry

Boy went over the water-jump he left a spurt of water behind him. At the end of the course the fault was announced against him. He kept his cheerful bearing but his tail drooped. Firefly, dancing and bobbing like her namesake, got ready to make her circuit. 'He's going to win! Your dad's going to win!' Aunt Glad screamed at Molly, their quarrel a thing of the past. 'Come on, Ern!' She brandished the programme and knocked off the hat of a gentleman in front of her: she was too excited to apologise. Alan's heart was thumping. Even Meg got up from the floor where she had been building a house of empty matchboxes.

Firefly's fury had reached bursting point. Alan could almost feel her sobbing as she hurled herself forward. When she came to the water-jump she seemed to recoil on to her haunches. Then she soared upwards, almost perpendicularly, hovered for a fraction of a second like a helicopter, and then with a sudden jerk moved forward, landing sideways just clear of the water. She tried to turn in her tracks but Uncle Ernest was ready for her. He righted her and set her at the next jump. Alan caught a glimpse of his face. He was as angry as his mount: his eyes flashed in savage enjoyment. He had never seen him look like that before. Aunt Glad looked thoughtful.

Firefly cleared the next jump. It seemed that she had sobered down and everybody relaxed. And then suddenly – she was off! She swerved sharply, nearly throwing her rider, came down facing in the opposite direction and bolted. The far end of the arena was bounded by a high brick wall, which formed the back of stables and outbuildings belonging to Colonel Petrie, the owner of the ground. He had not allowed stands against this wall: a piece of waste land was left in front of it, roped off from the arena.

It was for this wall that Firefly was making. Perhaps she saw in it an opponent more worthy of her mettle than the dummy which had tormented her all the afternoon. Perhaps she wanted to dash herself and her rider to destruction. She reached the

end of the course, cleared the rope and charged across the rough ground beyond. The spectators crowded to their feet. Aunt Glad uttered a shriek and turned to Molly: mother and daughter hid their faces on each others' shoulders. Alan's mother seized her husband by the arm. He turned his head from her to his mother with a worried expression as if he might be to blame. Great-uncle Charlie suddenly seemed conscious of his weight: he struggled to rise to his feet, his face turned purple. Meg, frightened by the general alarm, began to cry. Even the cousin from Canada took his hands out of the pockets of his raincoat.

Uncle Ernest was leaning forward, his head almost between his mount's ears. Only a few yards now separated them from the wall. A cry ran round the ground and people turned their heads away. And then, at the very last moment, Firefly stopped dead. A less expert horseman would have shot over her head and crashed into the wall and perhaps this was what Firefly intended. But Uncle Ernest merely rose a few inches and then with backward curve, as if it were part of the same movement, returned lightly to the saddle. He did not attempt to return to the course but cantered round the verge and through the opening to the stables. Firefly made no further demonstration: she wore a slightly startled air.

The party pulled themselves together and left their seats. As they filed out they heard Cherry Boy announced as winner. The crowd were still too shocked by Firefly's escapade to give him the applause his popularity merited, but he seemed to understand and he trotted out of the arena, his head held at a good-natured angle and with only a token twitch of his tail.

They hurried round the back of the arena to the stables. Uncle Ernest was surrounded by a crowd of admirers. Firefly was in her stall behind him. The Guv'nor was surveying the scene with a sardonic grin. Great-uncle Charlie, his complexion restored to its normal port-wine colour, pushed his way through and clapped Uncle Ernest on the back. The cousin from Canada

caught hold of his hand and began pumping it up and down. Aunt Glad was still elbowing her way through the crowd. When she reached her husband she pushed the others aside and flung her arms round his neck. 'I *told* you she was a devil!' she cried. 'I *told* you! What did you want to egg her on for? You might have been killed! Wait till you get home!' and she burst into tears. Alan's mother looked at her husband with an expression which struggled between a wish to say 'I told you so', and fright at having found her earlier prognostications confirmed.

'How did you do it, Ernie boy?' Great-uncle Charlie shouted above the din.

'That's right!' everybody chorused. 'Out with it, Ern! How did you stop her?'

Uncle Ernest unloosed his wife's arms and grinned. 'I *spoke* to her,' he said.

'Spoke to her! Just listen to him!' they cried.

'That's right - I spoke to her!'

'Ah, but what did you say, my boy?' Great-uncle Charlie boomed, winking at the crowd, content to play the part of 'feed'.

'I couldn't tell you that!'

'Not tell us what you said to Firefly?'

'Not with ladies present.'

'Come on, Ernie lad! You tell us! The ladies can stop their cars!'

Uncle Ernest looked round him with the cool stare which was so like his father's.

'I said: "Stop it, you bugger!"'

There was a shocked silence. Mrs Blount and Alan's mother looked the other way. Aunt Glad's hand flew to her mouth, then she began to cry: 'Stop it, you bugger! Stop it, you bugger!' The crowd burst into a roar of laughter. Uncle Ernest had to shake his wife to quieten her.

Before he led the way back to the trap he leaned over the

door of Firefly's stall and grinned derisively. She stood stock still. The Guv'nor too went up to the stall. 'You bitch!' he said quietly. In the semi-darkness at the back of the stall the whites of Firefly's eyes matched the glint of his.

A few minutes later Alan and Meg found themselves once more pulled this way and that on the floor of the trap, listening to the creaks and groans of coachwork and harness, like those of the rigging of a ship. It was as much as they could do to keep awake, but they were determined not to miss the traditional climax to the outing—supper at the Guv'nor's house. Greetings and congratulations were continually being called out from other vehicles belonging to friends and relations of the Guv'nor who were also on their way to the party. It was quite a cavalcade that passed under the wrought-iron sign 'The Town and County Riding School. Founded 1741' and into the cobbled yard. Parts of the buildings were considerably older. The remains of a sixteenth-century inn were incorporated in the main block, though in such a haphazard fashion that plaster, lathe, black timber, and nineteenth-century brick ran in and out of each other as if there had been a head-on collision. A fragment of the original gallery remained and local tradition had it that in Tudor times a troupe of West Country strolling players used to perform there.

The spire of St Barnabas' Church overlooked the riding school on the left and to the right loomed the bulk of the cathedral. At this hour of a summer evening when the sky was a dusky violet they seemed to detach themselves, leaning over the yard as if at any moment they might topple into it.

While supper was being prepared Alan and Meg were left to their own devices. In the in-between light the stone-flagged harness-rooms, the lofts, the outhouses stacked with bales of straw and hay and an assortment of curious machines for cutting chaff, and the whitewashed practice ring like a miniature circus were uncannily silent. There were innumerable derelict

pantries, coal-cellar, cupboards and sculleries. Alan and Meg were convinced that the Guv'nor and his family were unaware of the existence of most of them. In particular there was an abandoned harness-room which they regarded as their secret and to which they made their way when they were sure the grown-ups were out of sight. The door had been bricked over and they entered by pushing aside some boards nailed over the window. The stone floor was thick with dust like grey flour. There was dust too on the shelves where, as on the plinth of a display case, lay an assortment of empty tins and bottles and an ancient curry comb. Old pieces of harness hung from rusty nails. One of these nails had broken off and beneath the brown stain it had left on the wall lay a saddle with the stuffing trailing. In one corner lay a heap of harness. Alan picked up a piece of strap and bent it: it snapped as easily as a rotten twig. There was something forlorn about this black and brittle leather, held together by buckles rusted to paper thinness. In the dim light it seemed to stir as if the ribs of a ghostly horse were heaving beneath it. They returned to the yard. Across a few yards of cobbles, the children knew, a world of almost overwhelming vitality was sleeping.

Uncle Ernest sometimes took them there during the daytime. They loved to wander along the alleyway between the stalls. The flanks of the horses glowed in a variety of colours: red, chestnut, mahogany, black, white, yellow and dapple, and when they came in from exercise all these colours had changed again, gold deepening to copper and roan to a shade that was almost purple. The grooms and stable boys whistled as they worked, bustling in and out among the legs of the horses with brooms, buckets, brushes and curry combs. The legs of the great creatures had a particular fascination: the fetlocks so slender, the hooves attached it seemed by a thread – but a thread that was full of hidden power. the hind legs bent like the branches of trees, the hooves set as daintily as the paws of a cat.

When in autumn the horses came in after a run, the nostrils from which steam puffed in clouds were as large as caverns: when they snorted the sound seemed to have travelled round subterranean galleries. Alan watched with awe the dipping of the great heads, the long arching of the necks. Every detail of their anatomy was impressed upon his imagination, from the lustrous toffee-coloured eyes to the genital, like black gutta-percha.

Sometimes Uncle Ernest allowed him to use the curry comb. As he drew it along the flanks the muscles twitched under the unfamiliar touch. When he knelt under the horse's belly he would come upon a vein and he and Meg would lay their hands on it and feel the hot pulse: they would press their ears to the spot as if to a telegraph pole and imagine they heard the murmuring of the blood. Around them was the reek of urine frothing in the gutters, the smell of dung and the sharp snuff-like smell of dried horse sweat.

When they were stunned by all these sensations they would retreat to the harness-room. This was very different from the one they had discovered in the abandoned part of the stables. Here everything smelt of harness-soap and polish. The leather shone, supple as withies, and the brass fittings gleamed. But even this sanctuary was permeated with the mores of dried sweat raised by curry comb and brush: they stood out in a broad swathe when the sunshine penetrated the high window, leaving a salt taste on the lips, and causing the nostrils to itch.

Alan's father summoned them to supper. They crossed the yard and entered an unlit doorway. They had to grope their way across a storeroom before they reached the uncarpeted stairway. The living quarters sprawled over the outhouses and stables on the east side. The riding school invaded every corner. The antlers in the entrance hall were festooned with riding gear – huntsmen's caps, bowlers, riding-crops, broken stirrups and pieces of harness. Riding boots, their trees protruding,

stood like a row of skittles along the whole length of the wall.

The Guv'nor's wife fought a losing battle against this invasion. She received no encouragement either from her husband or her tomboyish daughters. In the living-room the chintz curtains concealed a welter of riding accoutrements. The lid of the grand piano was loaded with them. They lay on chairs and tables, in the corners and on the window-seat. She had succeeded in placing crocheted covers on the backs of some of the chairs: on the sofa these had been overlaid by an old mustard-coloured horse-blanket. Pictures of thatched cottages surrounded by hollyhocks were hemmed in by framed photographs of horses taken from every conceivable angle and exemplifying every conceivable posture.

It was not as if the poor woman *liked* horses. 'You know what some people are with cats?' she would say. 'Well, that's how these brutes affect me. The only comfort is that they don't jump on your lap.' If she was challenged to explain her antipathy she would wave her hands and exclaim: 'They looked so *naked*!'

There was a tremendous meal on a refectory table at the far end of the room. There were cold turkeys, sirloins of beef, meat pies, and a vast ham: there were mounds of fruit, jellies and blancmanges. There were two huge black teapots containing tea much the same colour. On the sideboard there were bottles of stout and beer, decanters of port wine and sherry. There was a cask of cider presided over by the Guv'nor. He had laid aside his coat, revealing a black and yellow check waistcoat with a primrose silk backing.

After supper they gathered round the piano. Doris, the younger of the Guv'nor's daughters, round and plump with cheeks like crab-apples, settled herself on the piano seat—as long as a sofa, unholstered in flowered brocade. Doris was reputed to be an excellent pianist, and she possessed too a thin but sweet soprano voice. Her elder sister Hetty—tall and powerfully built with massive plaits, gleaming like horsehair wound

round her head — had a fine contralto and was much in demand at local concerts.

At first the girls chose popular songs such as 'Annie Laurie', 'Sweet Afton', 'Pack Up Your Troubles', and 'Hold Your Hand Out, You Naughty Boy!' and encouraged the others to join in. Then with Hetty's help Doris lifted the lid of the piano-seat and extracted some sheets of music. Everyone fell silent. Even Great-uncle Charlie broke off in the middle of telling a joke. An atmosphere of solemn expectancy descended upon the room.

Alan and Meg withdrew to the far corner, and sat down on the floor under the gramophone with its green horn, shaped like the leaves of a giant aspidistra. As far as Alan was concerned there was an element of fear in this retreat. He disliked these climaxes to the Guv'nor's parties. It was not so much the words or tunes or the tense expressions of the men or the tears that gathered in the eyes of the women. It was something in Hetty's singing. A flush settled in the hollow of her throat: her neck was a vibrating column of flesh: there was something horrible in the rise and fall of her bosom. The deep contralto thrilled unpleasantly on his ear-drums. It struck him as inexorably female and adult. He was drawn towards it and at the same time he recoiled. He understood now why the previous year, Watchman, the Guv'nor's Labrador, had settled on his haunches, lifted his head and howled in the middle of 'Eileen Alannah'. He felt his own stomach turn to water as he listened.

Amid a storm of applause Hetty finished her singing, the music was stowed away and the lid of the piano was closed. Hetty's sweetheart Rab, a pale young man who was a petty officer in the Navy, had watched her hungrily while she was singing; now he caught hold of her hands and drew her on to his lap. This produced one of Great-uncle Charlie's saucy remarks and everybody laughed excessively. The Guv'nor filled the glasses which were quickly emptied as if the sight of Hetty's throat had made them thirsty. Doris put a record on the gramo-

phone and the raucous strains of a foxtrot blared out. Hetty and Rab, Doris and her boy friend began dancing with exaggerated jerky movements, gradually herding Great-uncle Charlie and his audience farther into a corner. Aunt Glad, her face flushed, her hair falling over her forehead, pulled her husband away amid cries of: 'Don't let her slip the halter over your head, Ernie!' and 'Now then, Ern, it's time you took the bit between your teeth!' She dragged him into the middle of the floor and made him dance. He had no idea of the steps but he jigged up and down while Aunt Glad alternately shook him and shrieked with laughter.

Driven from their corner by the gramophone Alan and Meg wedged themselves into a space on the sofa. Here the Guv'nor's wife sat bolt upright with her knitting. She had picked out Alan's parents as 'the quiet sort' and pointedly engaged them in conversation on 'nice' topics. She suffered with her heart: her face was the colour of crushed strawberries; it was surrounded by a halo of fine white hair. Molly and Victor meanwhile had found an armchair near-by: he sat on the arm and she lay back against his knees.

These pools of quietness had no effect on the pace of the current beyond. Not that the Guv'nor made any noise. With his cat-like tread and sardonic smile he moved among his guests, filling their glasses. But he was just as successful as Aunt Glad in her domain of the middle room in generating excitement, and soon the horses in the stables beneath them began to stamp up and down as if they wanted to join in.

Above the uproar Alan heard the jangling of a bell. The Guv'nor appeared to be the only other person to hear it. He stood with his head cocked on one side, then he laid down his glass and threaded his way to the door. At that moment Meg pulled at Alan's sleeve. 'I'se thirsty,' she said. Alan went over to the table which had been pushed back against the wall. He found a glass but the water-jug was empty. He made his way

across the room, went through the hall and on to the landing where there was a tap. He could make out the dim shape of the Guv'nor at the bottom of the stairs. To his surprise he recognised the voices of Great-aunt Gwen and her husband.

'Didn't know you 'ad company,' Great-aunt Gwen was saying.

'Won't you join us?' the Guv'nor replied.

'Wot! Me?' Great-uncle Edward said. 'You know I never touch a drop!'

'Then have something to eat. Do come up!'

'It's no use coming the lad-di-da with us,' Great-aunt Gwen replied. 'It's business wot we want to talk about!'

'At this hour?'

'We was passing. We've been on a late job – old Finlay 'as just passed away an' we wanted to buy some of 'is bits an' pieces. Business don't wait for no man!'

'We could go into the harness-room,' the Guv'nor suggested.

'We don't want to keep you from your guests, I'm sure. It'll 'ave to wait till tomorrow.' A fresh burst of laughter, led by Great-uncle Charlie's bellow, came from the living-room.

'Nice to be some people,' Great-aunt Gwen sniffed.

'Cost a pretty penny, I'll be bound! Eh? Eh? Eh?' Alan could imagine Great-uncle Edward moving his head inside the grubby collar like a hen with a sore neck.

At last the uproar slackened. Alan was by now too tired to know how it happened, but suddenly they were all outside in the courtyard. Lanterns bobbed about: a horse stamped and neighed: a chain rattled. The spire of the church and the square tower of the cathedral stood out against the grey-green sky across which scraps of cloud scurried like uprooted gorse bushes blown across a heath. Spire and tower seemed to have drawn closer together, to be almost touching. There was a babel of farewells and then the family found itself alone, unaccountably talking in whispers. Uncle Ernest carried Meg in his arms: the pressure of her face against his shoulder plumped out her

cheeks: her legs below the knees flopped like those of a rag doll. They hurried through the darkened side-streets as if they were refugees from a plague. Once or twice they encountered other families, also bearing exhausted children in their midst, returning from the day's excursion. They sped past, hugging the wall or crossed over to the other side of the road. Sometimes, emphasising the silliness, there was the clatter of a bucket and spade or a wail immediately hushed.

They turned into Majuba Road. The outlines of the houses wavered: the lamp-posts, their lights extinguished, swayed like the masts of ships in harbour. The paving-stones gleamed metallic in the moonlight: as they approached each tree the foliage rustled as if it were murmuring a greeting. But when they were half-way down the road they saw in the distance an oblong object jutting out into the otherwise empty roadway, breaking the dream-like symmetry. 'It's a car!' Aunt Glad said as if in this strange light it was necessary to name every object afresh.

'And it's outside *our* house,' Alan's mother added. They quickened their steps. As they drew closer they made out the shape of a green sports car with a bulbous bonnet round which was buckled a broad leather strap. It squatted at the kerbside with a deliberate, almost menacing air.

'Whoever can it belong to?' Alan's mother asked.

'It's Hector's, you can be sure,' her mother-in-law replied with a mixture of disapproval and gratification in her voice.

There were exclamations of dismay from the other women. 'How dreadful!' 'He came today after all!' 'What *will* he think of us?' And finally from Alan's mother: 'I *knew* we shouldn't have gone to Denton!'

A mackintosh covering was drawn over the well of the car. Pinned to it was a note. Alan's father handed it to his mother. The moonlight was bright enough for her to read it out as they clustered round the car: she spoke very softly so as not to disturb the neighbours. Uncle Hector announced that as he had

arrived to find the house locked up – ‘somewhat to my consternation’ – he had decided to ‘stretch his legs as far as the nearest hotel’. Perhaps they would keep an eye on his car? No doubt they would be only too glad to do so in view of the fact that he himself had ‘hardly received the welcome he had anticipated’. When they looked at ‘this dumb hostage’, he hoped they would ‘give a passing thought to one who – through no fault of his own – was spending his first night with his family in years upon a stranger’s bed’. He would return the following morning ‘some time after breakfast’.

When at length he and Meg were tucked up in the big double bed Alan lay on his back and immersed himself in the familiar atmosphere. He watched Molly as she rubbed cold cream into her face which grew softer and rounder as she did so. She leaned closer to the mirror and squeezed at an imaginary spot. She was humming one of the tunes that had been played on the gramophone at the Guv’nor’s. He wondered if Uncle Hector’s arrival had intruded upon her consciousness. He doubted if she gave it a thought. Once again he found himself envying that no-man’s-land which apparently rendered her and Victor impervious to the distractions of the outside world. There it seemed to him was the calm water: his the stream just beginning to race: ahead an ugly roaring and buffeting. Yet it was only yesterday that he and Meg had wandered among pools of even deeper content. Meg, separated from him by only a hand’s breadth, wandered there still. He turned towards her.

‘What did you like best?’ he asked.

‘The ride in the trap,’ she answered without hesitation.

‘What *part* of the ride in the trap?’ he insisted.

‘Inside – on the floor – of *couse*!’ She yawned: her eyes disappeared and her nose was reduced to a button. The yawn spread all over her body as if she were swallowing herself. There was no point in questioning her further. He knew she had spoken the truth. The few hours they had lain on the floor

of the trap, enclosed on four sides, jogged about like sausages in a pan, were the only part of the day's proceedings of which she retained any distinct impression. All the rest was a jumble of noises, colours, scents and movements. He nudged her half-heartedly. She let out a grunt, part protesting, part apologetic, but she was already asleep.

Molly finished fixing the curlers in her hair. She blew out the candle and climbed into her bed under the sloping ceiling. It creaked and rattled as she settled down. 'Good night, you two!' she called out. 'Don't you *dare* disturb me! It's the Sales tomorrow.' The Universal Stores had a sale, under one pretext or another, practically every month. She, too, fell asleep. Alan went on listening to the voices from the middle room below. He could not hear what was being said: the murmur was like the to-ing and fro-ing of waves, the men's voices forming the under-swell, the women's the crests of the waves, rising every now and then like the leaping of spray. Then there was the sharp noise as his father knocked out his pipe on the bars of the grate. It was followed by the scraping of chairs, the bed-time stretchings and yawnings, the shuffle of feet. There was the whirring noise as his father wound the clock, and on the first turn of the key Nipper's 'Prmm!' and the 'Plop!' as he leaped from the chair where he had been sleeping. There was the usual chorus of whispered 'Good nights' as the women came up to bed, the deep voices of the men as they locked the front door and then went out into the kitchen to let Nipper out. There was the hiss of water from the tap as Uncle Ernest filled a tumbler for his false teeth, the clearing of his throat as he, too, came up to bed. Then he heard his father open the back door and call Nipper's name in an urgent whisper and then an exasperated: 'Well, stay out then!' and a token closing of the door and its opening a moment later as Nipper, with another loud 'Prmm!' dashed in at the last moment, just as he did every night. And as happened every night the rusty bolt stuck in the socket, and Alan's father

was still breathing with the effort of forcing it home as he passed his bedroom door. All these sounds were identical in every respect to what they had been the night before and every other night. And yet for some reason they were endowed with an unfamiliar poignancy: he listened to them as if he might never hear them again.

Soon the house was silent except for his grandmother muttering and turning. But he still lay awake. The events of the day careered backwards and forwards in his mind like flocks of agitated sheep wheeling and darting this way and that, but refusing to be blurred together in sleep. Some change, he felt, had taken place in his relationship to these events. He had the vague feeling that it was because he remembered too much. Some mysterious extension of involvement had taken place.

At last he fell asleep to plunge immediately into a dream as if he had opened a door into a shaft. He and Meg were curled up side by side. The blackness that surrounded them was warm and tangible – a rotating slip-stream of darkness. It reminded him of a woodcut in one of the animal books which his grandmother had given him, which depicted two bears hibernating in a cave while above and around them was a circling band of blackness and beyond it the hurrying moon and stars and planets. In the dream he suddenly became aware of a pin-point of light in the far distance: he disengaged his limbs from Meg's, gently lowering her head upon the soft blackness and began to walk towards it. As he advanced it grew larger, and after a while he could hear a distant blaring of music. Pin-point and music gradually increased until at last he emerged from the mouth of the cave to be almost blinded by light and deafened by sound. He found himself in a long narrow lane, the grass of which was unnaturally green from a multitude of naphtha flares. At first he was conscious only of a confused medley of colours – blues and reds and yellows, together with the glitter of gold and silver tinsel – and the music tumbling around him. Soon he

realised that he was walking down one of the alley-ways of a vast fair-ground. On either side were booths of all shapes and sizes and stalls loaded with striped sticks of candy and multi-coloured sweets sweating in the heat of the naked flames suspended above them. There were giant swinging boats, their prows shaped like the heads of animals and the beaks of birds, and roundabouts with monstrous horses that rushed round with horrible lurching movements. It was from these roundabouts that the music came, bursting from thick pipes half hidden in clouds of steam. But all this clamour and movement seemed to be taking place of its own volition. All that he could see that resembled human beings were groups of giant motionless figures, in the shapes of men and women, but flat as if they were cut out from plywood, garishly painted with grinning faces and fiery cheeks and noses. He was able to pass through them without difficulty: he felt as if he alone had substance: he was a solid ball rolling along a lane and in and out of the flat figures. After a while, however, he noticed that the painted grins had grown broader and that the surfaces were becoming moist: and suddenly the figures began to swell and move, and a moment later they broke into violent animation, rushing to and fro, jostling each other, shrieking and yelling in raucous voices and waving great rattles. One of the figures stopped him with its foot, and bent down towards him, very slowly, and thrust a red glistening face close to his: a reek filled his nostrils, but he was not sure whether it was from melting paint or sweat. 'We are round too!' the figure yelled in his ear. 'You are one of us!' He was filled with a sensation of repulsion and anguish. He turned round and looked back. He could see right down the lane, with its glaring lights and colours, with its booths and roundabouts on either side, thronged now with bustling, noisy crowds – right back to the mouth of the tunnel, and then, as if he were looking through a telescope, down, down to the kernel of the cave where Meg lay curled up in the darkness, sleeping.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Come to the Cookhouse Door Boys! Come to the Cookhouse Door!' Greg had been playing for at least thirty minutes before Alan admitted to himself that he was awake. Through some oversight the blind had not been lowered the night before, but the curtains were drawn. They were made of faded chintz, but the sun turned them a uniform glowing yellow: obviously it was a fine, windless day, for they hung motionless like sheets of translucent metal creating the illusion that it was they that were the source of light.

Molly's bed was made, the fringes of the white quilt touching the floor on either side. It gave the room a timeless, brooding air. Meg woke up and looked about her through sticky lashes. There were none of the familiar sounds – the rattle of the milkman's float, the sharp rat-tat of the postman, the clatter of washing up – that normally would have enabled them to pinpoint the time of day to the nearest minute. The little room with its subdued golden light might have been sealed off from the rest of the house, and there was no telling whether they had been asleep for one night or a hundred years. When the silence was broken it was by a series of bumps and bangs quite alien to the daily pattern.

At last Alan remembered that it was the morning after the Denton show, when by tradition they slept late. He remembered, too, that Uncle Hector would be arriving. He leaped out of bed and dragged Meg after him. He was impatient when she put her shoes on the wrong feet: she thrust out her lower lip, half truculently, half tearfully. He tried to make amends by rubbing the toe-caps of her shoes, which were frayed from the way she scuffed her feet, with the sleeve of his jersey, and by putting them on for her with particular care, making sure that

the tongues were properly pulled up and that the feet of her socks were smooth.

They opened the bedroom door and went out on to the landing. The origin of the mysterious bangings and bumpings was explained. The women were getting ready for the visitor. It had been decided that he should be put in the middle bedroom because this was the one that had been most recently decorated: Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest were moving into the box room. The heavier furniture had been shifted by the menfolk before they went to work: but the women were running from room to room and up and down stairs making last-minute rearrangements. These began with tentative suggestions from the younger women, were followed by commentaries from the older one and issued in sudden forays according to the tenor of her pronouncements. As these tended to be somewhat cryptic, a good deal of ingenuity was called for in the interpretation. Thus when Aunt Glad exclaimed: 'Where will he put his things? That old chest-of-drawers won't be enough,' her mother's reply was: 'He has not been the best of husbands to poor Cora—but he *does* know how to dress.' Alan's mother and Aunt Glad hesitated only a moment before dashing to their respective rooms to re-emerge with armfuls of coat-hangers. The old lady inclined her head, gave a gratified smile and smoothed her skirt. Not only was she using her Winthrop Avenue voice, she was also wearing her Winthrop Avenue clothes: a long dress, steel-grey in colour, of a stiff rustling material, with mutton-chop sleeves fitting tightly over lower arms and wrists, and with a ruched and pleated bodice that fastened high at the throat and revealed an edging of lace above the collar. A circular gold brooch was pinned at her throat. Her hair was fastened in a bun. Where it was drawn back from the temples the skin was smooth: it blended with the colour of her hair and her whole face had a silvery pallor. She smelt of lavender and eau-de-Cologne. The high neck of

the dress made her hold her head very upright and the folds of the material imparted a stiffness to her carriage.

'Where will he put his shoes?' was the next speculation.

'I have to say it – he does look every inch the officer,' was the response. After a slightly longer interval for the unscrambling of the signal, there was another scurrying around the house from which Alan's mother returned, carrying several shoe-trees, earning another nod of approval. In this way an astonishing variety of articles which Alan and Meg had no idea that their parents possessed – and which they certainly never used – were transferred from their hiding-places to the middle bedroom.

The trickiest problem, however, was the commode. Should it or should it not be placed in Uncle Hector's bedroom? Even Alan's grandmother was shaken. 'Of course he's *used* to a bathroom,' she said. The younger women looked at each other aghast. The absence of bathroom and indoor sanitation was a source of heart-burning at the best of times.

'I know he's an *officer*,' Aunt Glad ventured at last, 'but he has had to live in tents, hasn't he?' Alan's mother dashed into her bedroom and emerged with a Cashmere shawl (a present from one of the soldier brothers who had served in India). This, she pointed out, could be draped over the commode. It would thus be camouflaged as a 'bedside cabinet'. If, however, the visitor *expected* to find a commode, he would surely make investigations – and his search would not go unrewarded. The others were loud in their praise of this stratagem, and Aunt Glad departed to fetch the controversial piece of furniture from the attic. It was made of mahogany, the lid covered with Turkish carpeting. Alan thought it a pity that so handsome an article should be hidden: he was sure that Uncle Hector would have appreciated it in its natural state.

'When he's staying at hotels, he has his breakfast in bed,' Alan's grandmother started again. 'But I expect he will be here for coffee. . . .' The younger women rushed to their respective

bedrooms to get themselves ready.

Alan and Meg continued downstairs and into the kitchen. The house smelt of polish and the floors bore witness to the hard work that had been lavished on them. Meg was apparently the only person to be unaffected by the atmosphere. She was in one of her most talkative moods, and Alan had difficulty in pulling himself together to listen to the last part of her riddle: '... An' then you'se pretend to be a dog – a *nice* dog – an' I'se a woolly sheep, an' you'se make me go into the den, but I'se naughty and run away, an' then you'se pretend to be a nasty dog, an' you'se show your teeth, like this,' and she caught hold of his sleeve and contorted her face in a grimace, 'an' then you'se make me come back, an' I go in the den, an' then you'se pretend to be a woolly sheep, an' you'se naughty, an' then you come into the den, an' then we'se *both* be in the den, an' we pretend the nice dog's sitting outside the den, going "Ah! ah! ah!" with his breath an' hanging his tongue out, an' then we have something to eat. . . .' She stopped for a moment, got down from the table and began to spread her slice of bread with dripping. 'Alan!' she said in a shocked voice, 'you wasn't listening!' He got down hastily and began helping her.

'We got to take the food into the garden,' she explained. 'You'se the dog's man first, an' you eat some breakfast, an' I'se the sheep an' you give me some: then we'se inside the den an' a pretend man gives us some *more* breakfast.'

He collected the slices of bread and dripping and followed her. Tony sprang from behind the water-butt. Meg looked down at him severely. 'No, you'se can't play,' she said. 'You'se too small for a sheep.'

They stepped into the grass. Through the gap in the hedge they met Mr Cowcher's eyes: he dropped his head and began jabbing with his hoe. Mr Cowcher's behaviour had been puzzling recently. He had done his best to avoid them and the little presents had ceased. Perhaps, Alan reflected, his pose

of disliking children had passed into reality. Perhaps it was something to do with the baby. There had been no further references to its arrival, though he had overheard the grown-ups speaking in significant whispers about 'poor Mrs Cowcher's condition'.

Meg ran round making bleating noises. Alan regarded her irritably. He strained his ears, wondering whether it was only in fancy that he heard the click of the front gate. Half-hearted, he joined in the game. But the house behind him was wrapped in an air of expectancy. He made many mistakes. Meg stamped her foot: a flush reddened her knees as well as her cheeks. She made him go through every movement of the game until he had got it right. He allowed himself to be bullied: it was the only way he could make amends for his divided attention.

Eventually Meg crawled into the den and, after gambolling up and down the garden for a few seconds bleating and barking his dual rôle, he, too, entered and sat down beside her. She was not deceived: his performance had been over-done and perfunctory at one and the same time. She was sullen and reproachful. She looked at the ragged piece of bread and dripping she still held in her hand, with sudden distaste. As if to say: 'Let's get it over with!' she broke it in half, and with a fierce gesture thrust his share into his hands. She had difficulty in swallowing. Stricken with guilt, Alan consumed his own portion with a show of heartiness, uttering vigorous bleats. Again he failed to impress. Meg regarded him with pouting lips and accusing eyes. A moment later a sensation of excitement gripped him in the pit of the stomach. Abandoning pretence he jerked upright. He could hear nothing, but he was convinced that the visitor had arrived. He glanced at Meg. She was gazing straight in front of her: slowly she raised her hand and placed her thumb in her mouth. He dared not look again. He scrambled out of the den, jumped to his feet and ran back to

the house.

He opened the back door and heard a man's voice. It was the deepest he had ever heard. The voices of his father and uncle permeated the house so that he had only to close his eyes in order to recapture their exact intonations. This was a sound that penetrated to corners and crevices and set up entirely new vibrations. The voices of the women, higher in pitch than usual, fluttered round it like moths round a flame. He looked round him as if he had strayed into the wrong house.

He pushed open the door of the middle room and entered. The man seated by the window caught sight of him at once. 'So this is Alan,' he said, in tones that suggested that this was the moment above all others he had been looking forward to. He spoke softly, but the sound, coming from somewhere inside a huge barrel chest, was distinct and resonant. 'Lil's boy,' he added: he made the words, which were accompanied by an intent look from reddish brown eyes under the bushiest pair of eyebrows Alan had ever seen, sound bold and flattering. Alan's mother blushed. 'Come here, boy!' With a delicious sensation of docility, Alan advanced towards the basket chair in which his uncle was seated – or rather wedged – legs apart, a big hand on each knee. The room seemed suddenly to have shrunk: the furniture looked small and shoddy. The basket chair was the biggest they possessed: under Uncle Hector's weight it looked as if it was about to fold up like a concertina. When he moved it creaked, and even when he was still his breathing produced a reedy whispering. In his mind's eye Alan saw his uncle rise to his feet and, finding the basket chair adhering to his person, brush it off as if it had been a straw.

When he was a few inches away Alan stopped. Uncle Hector put out his hands and drew him close. In the harbour between the great knees, encircled by the brawny arms, the big body crouched over him, he turned giddy. He felt that all his senses were being assailed at once, that the barriers between them had

dissolved. He was aware of a kaleidoscope of impressions: a big red face, with deep clefts on either side of the mouth; big lips and jutting chin; a nose so wide that it looked as if it had been broken and cavernous nostrils filled with hair. There was reddish hair too on the backs of his fingers: he wore a watch on a wide strap: the hairs protruded on either side like grass growing round a stone. Alan's senses fastened on leather and hair, and the odour produced by the action of sweat upon them.

Uncle Hector was in uniform. Alan had been too over-awed to take this in before. The Sam Browne belt and the strap over his shoulder looked as if they had been lacquered. The khaki cloth felt different from that of his father's uniform: he recalled the soreness it had caused his legs when he had carried him home during one of his leaves. But he was conscious that the grip on his shoulder had relaxed and that his uncle's attention had strayed. It fastened on Meg, who had silently entered the room.

'So this is Meg,' Uncle Hector used exactly the same tones as before; there was the same bending of the bushy eyebrows and the same stare of the reddish brown eyes.

'*Glad's* girl.' And then added quickly: 'Her mother's looks!' Aunt Glad bridled: her sister-in-law looked piqued. 'You ought to have had a girl,' Uncle Hector said softly, balancing the score. Meg stood, plump legs apart, her lower lip thrust forward, regarding her mother and aunt with an enigmatic air. She ignored her uncle's imperious: 'Come to uncle then!' Her mother had to propel her within range of the hairy hands. As she was grabbed within the circle of arms and knees. Alan felt himself dismissed by a nudge in the back. He wriggled his shoulder-blades: the spot ached pleasantly.

On the chair near-by was his uncle's army cap: inside it a pair of gloves, and lying across it a malacca cane. The fingers of the gloves were darkened by sweat: the crown of the cap was lined with rose-coloured silk with the trade-mark of the maker

in gold: there was a patch in the middle that smelt of bay rum.

Meg held herself stiff and unyielding in her uncle's arms. He turned his head and focused his eyes upon her. Meg, after a quick look at her mother, returned her uncle's gaze stolidly. Her face took on a stupid expression. The smile on Uncle Hector's face disappeared. The corners of his mouth drooped: the clefts in his big face rearranged themselves in downward curves. He dropped his arms from Meg's shoulders and looked reproachfully across the top of her head.

'She's shy,' Aunt Glad explained. Meg's cheeks quivered in a smile. She went over to the corner by the bamboo table and seated herself on the floor, arranging her skirt primly around her. Alan lingered by the basket chair, but Uncle Hector took no further notice of him. Sheepishly he joined Meg. She looked at him with the same stupid expression that she had directed against her uncle.

The younger women rose to their feet, explaining that they were going to fetch the coffee. When they had gone Uncle Hector looked uneasily at his mother-in-law. She had not uttered a word. Her lips were compressed, but she did not look anything like as disapproving as Alan had expected. She was not sitting as upright as usual. Alan was conscious for the first time of the contours of a woman's body behind the stiff material of her dress. After a while Uncle Hector leaned towards her.

'Did you get that wreath . . . Mother?' he asked in a surprisingly soft and humble voice.

'No, I didn't, Hector.'

'Why not?'

'You know why not. You ought to get it yourself.'

'I will! I will! First thing tomorrow. Or the day after. . . . The best that money can buy!'

'And you'll come to the cemetery?'

'We'll go tomorrow . . . or the day after . . . You and I together, eh?' He bent his brows and fixed on his mother-in-law the same

stare of his reddish brown eyes that he had directed upon his sisters-in-law. To Alan's astonishment his grandmother blushed just as they had done. He had thought her countenance impervious to such visitations. Sometimes he and Meg sat on her lap and stroked her face, tracing the folds and wrinkles, placing their finger-tips on the corners of her mouth where fine white hair grew like down on peaches. When they kissed her they steered their mouths to these puckered corners, which were like raspberries silvered by mildew, with the same musty-sweet smell and flavour. But this surface had seemed to bear no relation to skin through which blood coursed and talked. Even round the temples where it was more delicate than elsewhere, it looked like tissue paper, smoothed out and slightly greasy. Sometimes, too, Meg brushed her grandmother's hair, kneeling on her lap and working with little grunts and gasps until it shone like silver rain. She would shake her head and twitch her shoulders, assuring them that there had been a time when she could sit on her hair 'quite easily'. But her face had never kindled. The white of the hair seemed to shed its light upon it like frost. And now there was this delicate flush, quite breathtakingly beautiful, it seemed to Alan.

When it faded her face was pinched. She turned to her son-in-law. She spoke rapidly and urgently. 'How could you, Hector? How *could* you go off like that?'

'There was a war on,' he replied sullenly.

'But you didn't have to walk out. Without even visiting poor Cora.'

'I . . . I wanted to get away . . . I . . . I was upset. Yes, that's it. I *had* to get away!'

'But it's over a year.'

'But, Mother - I *am* in uniform.'

'You've had at least one leave since then.'

'There's been a lot to do. I shall be demobbed soon, and I'm not sure I want to go back to the Merchant Service. . . . I've

been making inquiries. . . .’

‘You used to tell Cora and me that being a captain in the Inland Transport Service would get you a better ship. . . .’

‘Really, Mother! It is my business!’

‘You didn’t talk like that when the three of us were together.’

Uncle Hector muttered something. Clefs and hollows appeared in his face as in a punctured football. The reddish brown pupils remained fixed

‘Surely you could have spared one day!’ the old lady broke out again. ‘You could at least have sent a wreath!’

‘I told you – we’ll get one tomorrow.’ She spoke more vehemently. ‘Hector! I’m *disappointed* in you! After the good times we had together . . . and poor Cora hardly cold in her grave!’ It was the first time Alan had heard his grandmother refer openly to Aunt Cora’s death. He remembered the dry, burning feel of her cheeks: perhaps, he thought with a thrill of horror, she really had taken a long time to cool.

‘It is over a year . . .’ Uncle Hector said.

‘A year! Couldn’t you remember her that long? Couldn’t you give the dead *that* much respect?’

‘I . . . I can’t stand all this business of graves and cemeteries. I *hate* death. . . .’

‘It’s your *wife* who’s dead!’

‘I’m sorry. . . .’

‘Sorry! You’re sorry about Nurse Crossett, too, I suppose?’

‘Now look here, Mother, I won’t have Iris – I mean Nurse Crossett – dragged into it!’

‘You’ve dragged her in already – by her Christian name.’

‘It’s a manner of speaking. . . . It’s a way we had on the troopship. Everybody was very matey. . . .’

‘“Matey”! That’s a nice word for it!’

She jerked her shoulder and threw out her arm in a clumsy gesture. Uncle Hector stared at her. ‘Really, Mother!’ he said, ‘you’re making too much of it.’ She turned on him quickly:

her face was the colour of flour. 'Well, have you?' she said, pursing her lips and nodding her head up and down. Uncle Hector drew back as if she had struck him. 'Have I *what*?' She drew herself upright. 'Oh, nothing!' she muttered. She smoothed her skirt and patted her hair. It was Uncle Hector's turn to flush: the blood mounted slowly, as if it had difficulty in permeating the leathery skin; his tan deepened, as if a mahogany stain had poured over his face. He spoke in a husky voice.

'We'll go to the cemetery tomorrow, won't we, Mam?' he said. 'Just you and me, eh, Mam? We've always got on well together, you and me, haven't we, Mam?'

The door was pushed open and Alan's mother appeared pushing a tea-trolley. The silver coffee-pot had been borrowed from Mrs Blount. Aunt Glad followed bearing a plate of jam-tarts and a cherry cake mounted on a cake-stand.

It was only now that Alan took note of the transformations undergone by his mother and aunt. The comb tracks reminded him of the lines on freshly-patted butter and gave the coils of hair at either side of their temples the appearance of wings. They had applied their 'powder papers' lavishly. He suspected too that they had rubbed rouge into their cheeks. He knew that Aunt Glad possessed some in a tiny round container which she hid from Uncle Ernest. 'If Ernest knew,' she confided in her cronies, 'why, he'd leave me!' and her eyes would sparkle with excitement. 'Yes, he *means* it!' The effect of the rouge was to heighten her vivacity. But his mother sported it with a hang-dog air: it merely made her cheek-bones look raw.

She was wearing her 'extra rings'- one of them had belonged to her mother, the other was a present from her favourite brother. Alan had never before known her wear them beyond the bedroom door. She was also wearing her imitation pearl necklace. Her best blouse was fastened high at the neck and had pink candy stripes. She was particularly proud of her cream

flannel skirt because it had belonged to 'real gentry'. It had been given her during the war by a visitor from one of the benevolent organisations, included in a bundle of clothes—brought ostensibly for a church bazaar. She had saved her pride by sending most of the bundle to the bazaar, but she had kept the voluminous old-fashioned tennis skirt and altered it by the addition of various tucks and a row of buttons down the pleat. The cream of this skirt, together with the pearls, toned down the rubies in the rings, giving them, too, a milk-f appearance. Aunt Glad was more dashing. There were diamonds in her rings and a diamanté clasp on the lapel of her Sunday best blue costume. Her ear-rings flashed when she moved her head.

Uncle Hector looked from one to the other as he drank his coffee; the cup looked no bigger than a thimble in his fingers. When he had finished he wiped his hands and mouth on a khaki-coloured silk handkerchief. He produced a silver cigarette-case from his hip pocket. Alan gazed in admiration. It was curved in order to fit the contours of his uncle's anatomy. The cigarettes were kept in place by a yellow elastic band. He offered the case to his mother-in-law. She waved it aside: but she looked pleased. He offered it to Alan's mother. She shook her head with a shocked 'Oh no!'

'We're not some of your troopship women,' his mother-in-law interposed, looking a little guilty at introducing a tart tone into the proceedings. Uncle Hector, abashed, made only the briefest of movements towards Aunt Glad. He turned to his mother-in-law, his eyebrows raised. 'Have I your permission?' She inclined her head. But before he could extract a cigarette Aunt Glad leaned forward. 'What about me?' she cried.

'I beg your pardon!' He held out the case with special solicitude. Then he produced a silver lighter, and getting up from his chair, which creaked and groaned protestingly, leaned over her and lit her cigarette. Meg took her thumb from her mouth and craned forward: she had never seen her mother smoke.

She held the cigarette between finger and thumb and exactly in the middle of her mouth. This pushed her lips forward into an O. Uncle Hector leaned back and watched her: the basket chair creaked as if it was a tree whose branches were about to break. She smoked too quickly, and when she took the cigarette out of her mouth the end was hanging in shreds. She pulled a face. 'If only Ernie could see me now!' she cried. Her eyes sparkled and she burst out laughing until smoke and laughter made tears start to her eyes. Uncle Hector tilted his head to one side and smiled. 'Now then, girlic!' he said in a gruff voice. But she could not stop laughing, and he, too, began to laugh softly from somewhere far back in his chest.

But Alan and Meg were arrested by a new marvel Uncle Hector was inhaling. He drew the smoke in very slowly. It curled round like a fog inside the hairy nostrils and then, hours later it seemed, slowly coiled out. Although he made his cigarette last a long time and was smoking long after Aunt Glad had stubbed hers out, a sodden yellow blob, he produced a remarkable quantity of smoke. For some reason, too, it was very blue smoke: his head floated in a haze of blue. When he had finished he went out to his sports car, returning with his 'light luggage'. This consisted of several leather cases of unfamiliar design, with regimental details stamped on them. His chest, he informed them, could wait until the men came back – 'to give me a hand,' he added as an afterthought. 'I'll help you unpack, my boy,' his mother-in-law said, and led the way upstairs. The other women began clearing up the coffee-cups; every now and then they stopped and listened to the murmur of voices from upstairs. Alan and Meg searched for the crumbs of the cherry cake: they moistened the tips of their fingers and mopped them up. They were not hungry, but for the first time they found the middle room boring. It had taken on a derelict air, as if it had been lopped off from the rest of the house. It did not revive until Uncle Hector's voice came booming down

the stairs.

'Come on up!' he shouted. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad put down the coffee-cups and scampered from the room. 'I don't want to lose my family again!' Uncle Hector called out when they were half-way up the stairs. 'He's got something for you,' his mother-in-law added. The women nearly fell up the stairs in their eagerness.

Alan and Meg followed them into the middle bedroom. All trace of Aunt Glad's and Uncle Ernest's occupancy had disappeared. By unbuckling straps, opening cases and scattering a few personal belongings, Uncle Hector had made the room his own. It was transformed, moreover, into something rich and strange. On a hook by the bed hung a dressing-gown, its silk so fine that Alan could envisage screwing it into the palm of his hand or passing it through the key-hole: at the same time the texture was such that it drooped from the coat-hanger like a captive sliding from a policeman's grip. It was a shimmering red from which darted streaks of rust, flame, orange and black at every stirring of the breeze: for Uncle Hector had opened the window which had defied the efforts of his brothers-in-law for years, and which now revealed in the crevices of the framework the desiccated corpses of moths, butterflies and blue-bottles. The most magnificent feature of the dressing-gown was the Chinese dragon motif, though Alan could not make up his mind whether it was several dragons, topped, tailed and truncated by the tailor's scissors, or one majestic beast that spread his sinuous length and curly appendages over the whole surface.

This dressing-gown cast a flickering light over the shabby green wall. It was challenged in magnificence by the shirts and pyjamas scattered on the bed, the chair, and even – Alan saw, following the direction of the women's gaze – on top of the commode. His father's pyjamas were of striped flannel: Uncle Ernest favoured a night-shirt: it was a family joke that even

this voluminous garb could not conceal his bandy legs. But Uncle Hector's pyjamas were soft and silky: they were striped red and blue, and in Paisley patterns of chocolate and orange. There were gleaming white shirts and others of mushroom and pearl, biscuit and pale green. Ties coiled amongst them like striped and spotted snakes.

There was leather everywhere. A travelling clock set in green morocco stood on the commode – or bedside cabinet, as it was referred to from now on. Binoculars in a leather case hung from another hook on the wall. On the dressing-table lay a leather case from which protruded a pair of hair-brushes backed with ivory.

The women's eyes were fixed on a leather grip which was still half full. They pretended to be unconcerned, their hands hanging at their sides like girls waiting for their Sunday School prizes. Uncle Hector's hand hovered for a moment over the grip: then he plunged in and produced something wrapped in tissue paper. 'For you, Mam!' he announced. She unwrapped it and held out a cylindrical object about four inches long.

'It's an umbrella handle,' Uncle Hector informed her.

'It's lovely, my boy. . . . I've broken the handle of my old umbrella.'

'Intuition! I must have had an intuition!'

'That's it. But Hector, it's *silver*. . . .'

'Well, not *our* kind of silver. It's Amara silver. I got it in Mesopotamia – when I was on the Tigris with the Inland Transport. . . .'

'Amara silver!' She exclaimed it reverently. 'Let's see! Let's see!' the younger woman exclaimed. The umbrella handle was passed round. 'Me too!' Meg cried. Alan looked over her shoulder. The 'Amara' silver was a greyish blue in colour, infinitely more precious, surely, than the common variety: it was decorated with black chasings of camels and palm trees.

Uncle Hector bent once more over the leather grip. He pro-

duced two small packages. 'For my *dear* sisters-in-law,' he said solemnly. He held them for a moment at shoulder height as if he feared they might jump at them like dogs at a bone. Alan's mother was the first to uncover her present. It was a brooch, also of Amara silver and chased with the same design as the umbrella top. A moment later Aunt Glad produced a similar brooch. They were loud in their cries of delight while covertly examining each other's gifts to make sure that they were equal in size but distinguishable in shape.

But Uncle Hector was glaring at Alan and Meg: he was irritably jingling some coins in his pocket. Alan realised that he had forgotten to bring them presents. He returned to the grip and began to rummage in its contents. 'And now for Alan and Meg!' he cried, with forced jocularly. 'Ladies first!' He produced a tin of humbugs, went through the motions of presenting it to Meg and then exclaimed: 'I'm sure Meg will want *us* to share in her good fortune!' He made a show of removing the wrapping in order to conceal the torn ends and handed the tin round. Finally he put a humbug in his own mouth and cried: 'Now to top it up!' He dropped something inside and handed the tin to Meg. She opened it and peered inside: it was half empty. She took out the coin which Uncle Hector had placed there, turned it over several times and dropped it back into the tin. She extracted a humbug, put it in her mouth and began to suck noisily, her eyes fixed on Uncle Hector. He frowned and turned back to the grip.

He rummaged again. At last he exclaimed: 'And what do you think I've brought for you?' Alan stepped closer. 'Now then, greedy eyes!' Uncle Hector was holding out a curious cone-shaped brass object. Alan caught his breath: it might have been an object from another planet, shaped by supernatural hands. Meg was more down to earth. 'What is it?' she asked scornfully. Uncle Hector lowered his brows. 'It's the *nose of a shell*,' he announced. Alan's eyes shone: the mundane

explanation had not fallen short of the imagining. 'What's more,' Uncle Hector added, 'it's *Turkish*.' He indicated the scroll-like writing round the base of the cap. Meg put another humbug into her mouth as if to demonstrate that although her present consisted of wasting assets, it was more practical than Alan's. 'What's it *for*?' she asked.

'I was going to use it as a paper-weight!' He snapped. 'I mean,' he added, 'some people use them for paper-weights. When boys get them for presents they like to have them for . . . well, for the interest of the thing. Why, Alan'—he lowered his voice—'you could start a museum!' Uncle Hector rubbed the nose of the shell on his sleeve: the brass reflected the fire of the dressing-gown. 'In point of fact,' he said, holding it up as if he were gazing into a crystal, 'in point of fact, *this* is something special . . . a Turkish gun-boat . . . nearly got us . . . good job I took the action I did . . . mentioned in dispatches again to tell the truth,' he sighed reminiscently. 'There's quite a story,' he said. 'Ah, well, one day perhaps!' He glanced sharply round. Aunt Glad's eyes shone: those of Alan's mother overflowed with romantic imaginings: Alan knew that she was on the bridge of Uncle Hector's ship, while the Turkish shells, like golden bees, hummed angrily overhead, and Uncle Hector, with a telescope tucked under his arm and half hidden in smoke, roared his orders. . . . A trace of doubt, however, touched his grandmother's face, like a wisp of cloud on a clear sky. 'But I didn't know the Turks were on the Tigris . . .' she began. 'Can't tell you everything,' Uncle Hector told her. 'Security, you know!'

'Could I hold it now?' Alan asked. Uncle Hector placed the nose of the shell in the palm of his hand and closed his fingers over it. When he let go the unexpected weight nearly sent it plummeting through Alan's fingers. He held on: he could hardly believe that an object so charged with his uncle's personality and memories had been transferred to his keeping.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The midday meal was called luncheon for the occasion. It was notable for the quantity of crockery and cutlery – borrowed from Mrs Blount – and for the unfamiliar food. When Uncle Hector was presented with his plate of thinly-sliced ham and daintily-arranged salad, his nostrils opened and shut like trap-doors. He sat, the borrowed silver knife and fork in huge fists, looking like one of the larger carnivores ravenous for bloody meat and presented with a monkey-nut. The jelly and blanc-mange that followed were served in dishes not much bigger than wine-glasses: the cheese was cut into squares like pineapple cubes. When he had finished Uncle Hector sat back in his chair with a baffled expression on his face.

‘Was it all right?’ Alan’s mother asked. She had been the moving spirit behind the meal which she was determined should reach the highest standard of elegance. Aunt Glad had welcomed her leadership for once because it gave her an opportunity for exercising the artistic side of her nature. Before her marriage she had worked as a milliner at Ludlow’s, the most select store in town, which actually served ‘the county’, a circumstance that atoned for many sins in her sister-in-law’s eyes. Her relations had bought her a sewing machine for a wedding present. Alan and Meg loved to see her feet flashing away on the treads: there was no more comforting sound than the steady clack-clack that it made. It was, too, a thing of beauty with its gleaming torso, decorated with scroll-work, like a black and gold swan. Although, however, she made clothes for the children and her husband’s shirts and took in a certain amount of dressmaking, she had refused to practise her ‘trade’, even to

make her own hats. But she had devoted herself to the greens and reds of lettuce, cucumber, beetroot and tomato as if they were pieces of felt to be stitched together into a gorgeous – and insubstantial – creation. She was so absorbed in mourning the demolition of her handiwork that she did not notice the irritable way in which Uncle Hector scooped up the last shreds.

‘Very nice – very *dainty*!’ he said. His mother-in-law came to the rescue. ‘I *think* . . .’ she began. Alan’s mother remembered the meals her brothers consumed when they were on leave. She sighed, got to her feet and fetched the cheese-dish and the bread-board. Pain that this part of the meal did not match in elegance what had gone before struggled in her face with pleasure at the touching gratitude with which her brother-in-law seized upon the reinforcements.

But something still worried him.

‘When do Arthur and Ernest get home?’ he asked.

‘About half-past six,’ Alan’s mother told him.

‘They have their tea out, I suppose?’

‘Yes. *We* have tea here. . . .’

‘*Afternoon* tea?’

‘Oh, of course!’

‘H’m . . .’ Alan’s mother paused. Then she continued reluctantly: ‘Arthur and Ernest have . . . ah, high tea when they get in. Perhaps you’ll be able to manage a bit then as well?’ Uncle Hector’s face brightened.

‘We could have the rest of that ham for supper tonight,’ his mother-in-law added, with a sidelong glance at Uncle Hector. ‘Oh, so you have supper too?’ he responded enthusiastically.

‘As a matter of fact,’ Alan’s mother announced, tilting her head to one side and looking at him with a waggish expression, ‘Mrs Blount’s coming to supper.’

‘Who the hell’s Mrs Blount?’

‘Why, *Mumell*!’

‘Oh ah?’

'Don't you remember . . . from last time . . . *Muriel?*'

'Oh, I dare say!' He stretched himself, stifled a yawn, and getting to his feet excused himself, explaining that he had 'one or two things to do', and that perhaps he would treat himself to 'forty winks'. He kissed his mother-in-law on the forehead, yawned again and left the room. He did not notice that Alan and Meg, on their way to the garden, were close behind him. As he climbed the stairs they heard him muttering 'Chicken feed!' Half-way up he stopped, plunged his hand into one of his pockets and extracted a flat curved object, something like the cigarette-case in shape. He applied it to his mouth and tilted back his head. He smacked his lips, sighed 'That's better!' and returned the flask to his pocket. Alan observed without surprise that it was capped with silver and encased in leather.

It had been raining again. By the time they reached the den the white socks which they had donned in honour of the visitor were muddied and sprinkled with grass seed. But inside the den the fine earth, with its deposits of crumbling twig and leaf, was only slightly darkened like sawdust in a circus ring after sprinkling. The drops of rain that fell on to their faces were fresh and cool, and a pleasant smell came from the leaves. The rain had given a new lease of life to the last of the cone-shaped flowers which grew, like miniature white lilac, among the leaves of the hedge. They were thin and spiky, but the moisture brought out their scent, sweet and slightly sickly from the white parts, like burnt sugar from the brown tips. A solitary bee sizzled and hovered among them. Meg was eating the last of her humbugs. Alan removed the nose of the shell from his trouser pocket and polished it on the sleeve of his jersey.

Uncle Hector reappeared as soon as he heard the rattling of the tea-cups. He enjoyed four cups of tea (in Mrs Blount's best china) and demolished the cucumber sandwiches and iced cakes between a yawn and a smile: Alan and Meg were reminded of the way in which Watchman, the Guv'nor's Labrador, had once

disposed of a mound of Irish stew in three sweeps of his tongue. This time Uncle Hector treated the lightness of the repast with affability. 'Just the thing to whet my appetite for high tea, eh?' he roared.

To everybody's disappointment he had changed from his uniform into a navy-blue suit with a pin stripe. But it was double-breasted so that he looked even broader of shoulder and chest. Alan was astounded that anyone could wear something in the nature of 'Sunday best' with such ease on a mere weekday. His socks were of blue silk and his black brogues were beautifully polished. He made several attempts to alter the 'refined' atmosphere. He told a story that made Alan's mother blush, and readjusted the Amara silver brooch on Aunt Glad's blouse, exclaiming: 'Brother-in-law's privilege!' and causing her to giggle. His mother-in-law brought in Aunt Cora's name at every opportunity. 'Poor Cora had a tea-set like this, do you remember?' . . . 'How poor Cora would have enjoyed these cakes!' . . . 'Did poor Cora ever see you in that suit?' He assumed the correct expression for these remarks, but behind the cover of lighting his cigarette Alan could have sworn he heard him mutter: '*Damn* poor Cora!' When at last he heard the front door open, with a flattering bang of urgency, he jumped to his feet with evident relief.

Alan's father and Uncle Ernest shook hands shyly. Uncle Hector's response made them blink. It was as if they had released him from a not very congenial harem. 'Arthur, me bhoy! Ernest, me bhoy!' he roared so that the window rattled. He seized their hands and pumped them up and down. He slapped them on the back and finished up with an arm round each pair of shoulders as if in his exuberance he was about to knock their heads together. Alan felt a pang. There was something undeniably humble about his father's laugh. Really, the contrast between Uncle Hector on the one hand and his father and Uncle Ernest on the other was too much of

a good thing. Beneath the clasping arms his father was revealed as a round-shouldered man of medium height, with a face as white as his collar, a prominent Adam's apple, skinny legs, short-sighted eyes and an apologetic smile. Uncle Ernest shrank to the dimensions of a lop-sided little man with bow legs and a creased brown monkey face. There was something overpowering about the six foot two inches of flesh, muscle, hair, teeth, that towered above them. Then there was the unflattering contrast in dress. Uncle Ernest's breeches may have been made for him – the Guv'nor exercised supervision in this respect – but his coat, a left-over from an old ready-made suit, was shiny at the elbows. Alan's mother saw to it that her husband's clothes were well-pressed and darned, but the collar of his jacket was too high: it gave him the appearance of having spent the day suspended from a coat-hanger. Yes, these contrasts almost justified the touch of contempt in Uncle Hector's attitude. . . .

He experienced a revulsion of feeling. The sight of his father and uncle standing with bowed shoulders filled him with a fierce desire to rush up to them and embrace them, to push Uncle Hector aside, to rescue them from burning houses, to protect them from the attacks of robbers and murderers. The top of his father's head, the pink scalp showing through the thin hair, was as fragile, it seemed to him, as that of a baby.

He turned his gaze instead upon Uncle Hector. He noted the smirk on his big face, the way in which he pressed down on his brother-in-law's shoulders in order to emphasise his own height, the glances in the direction of the women to make sure that they were paying attention, the affected Irish brogue. He saw all this – but he could feel no anger. Such reflections were powerless against the memory of Uncle Hector's embrace when he had met him that morning in the middle room. He could not bear to look at his father and Uncle Ernest: his duplicity, he felt, must be clearly written on his face. Suddenly he saw himself walking with Meg in the morning light to the sound

of Greg's bugle, talking in whispers while the counterpane was zig-zagged with moonlight, eating raspberries in the den. He felt as if he was looking back to an idyllic past of innocence and calm.

During high tea Alan's mother and Aunt Glad made it plain that they were only too aware of the difference in table manners between their husbands and their guest. It was true that Uncle Hector made no attempt to vie with his sisters-in-law in finicky eating; he tucked in heartily, but, their expressions seemed to say, here was someone accustomed to dining in captain's cabin and officers' mess: the size of his appetite could be excused by virtue of his dexterity with knife, fork and serviette. They now appeared to glory in the amount of food he could tuck away: and they filled his plate time after time. On the other hand, they either ignored their husbands' tentatively offered plates or, when they did attend to them, gave them small helpings accompanied by cold stares as if to hint that they were not really fit to eat at the same table. In their nervousness Alan's father and Uncle Ernest stuck out their elbows, held their knives and forks upright, spilled their food, wiped their noses in their serviettes and made sucking noises when they drank their tea. Their wives winced as if they had bit on exposed nerves. Out of sympathy with the men, Alan upset a cup of hot tea in his lap and was led out of the room howling.

When he was allowed to return the grown-ups were sitting round the table while Uncle Hector finished a cigarette. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad sat with their hands demurely folded in their laps. His father and Uncle Ernest were grinning sheepishly, their eyes fixed on their guest. His grandmother kept glancing at her son-in-law with pursed lips as if to intimate that it was time they had another *tête-à-tête*. Conscious of this scrutiny, Uncle Hector jumped to his feet and clapping the other men on the back cried: 'Well, me hearties! How about making a night of it?'

His brothers-in-laws' eyes brightened at the thought of being thus drawn into the category of roistering shipmates and at the prospect of escaping from the women's critical regard. The women received the proposal in frigid silence. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad looked at their husbands with an expression which appeared to suggest that an idea so vulgar must have originated in their minds and that it was by some underhand means that they had infected their guest with it – and which also implied that in any case *they* couldn't be expected to carry their liquor like gentlemen. Alan's grandmother assumed a pained, more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger expression.

'What, *tonight*, Hector? Of *all* nights?' she said. 'I had *hoped* that we might have another talk about poor Cora.'

A look of panic spread across Uncle's Hector's face. 'Yes, of course! Of course!' he muttered. Then his face brightened. 'I thought you might want me to call on some of the family,' he said in appropriately solemn tones. 'I haven't seen any of them since the funeral. . . .'

'Who, for instance?'

Uncle Hector thought rapidly. 'I thought I might look in on Aunt Gwen and Uncle Edward.'

There was an ominous silence

'What have I said now?'

'We are not on speaking terms,' his mother-in-law informed him. They told him about the writing-cabinet. A gleam of hope appeared in Uncle Hector's eyes.

When they had finished he banged his fist on the table. 'But Cora said *you* were to have it, Lil!' he roared.

'That's just what we told her!' Aunt Glad exclaimed, her eyes flashing.

'Gwen never was one to respect other people's rights,' her mother observed, shaking her head mournfully.

'Something must be done,' Uncle Hector proclaimed. He jumped to his feet. 'I'll give them a piece of my mind!' he

brandished a hairy fist. 'I'll show them I'm not someone to be trifled with! I'll teach them to treat *my* family like that! I'll teach them' – and with a sidelong glance at his mother-in-law he lowered his voice to a sepulchral depth – 'I'll teach them to show a proper respect for poor Cora's wishes.' Alan's mother and Aunt Glad regarded him with shining eyes. Alan's grandmother looked mollified. 'After *that* news I shall *certainly* need a drink,' Uncle Hector concluded. He strode towards the door. 'Come on you two!' he called over his shoulder. Alan's father and Uncle Ernest hurried after him. The three men had disappeared before the women's glow of approval had time to fade.

'Well!' Alan's grandmother exclaimed when she had recovered from her surprise.

'Let's hope they get back in time for supper,' Alan's mother muttered.

'Let's hope they get back sober!' her sister-in-law added tartly.

The women began clearing the table. While they were out of the room Alan and Meg took the precaution of settling themselves in the corner. A new cloth with a fringe of multi-coloured silk had been spread on the bamboo table. It practically hid them, while their own view of the room became diaphanous as if through a shower of pink and blue and golden rain. It was long past their bedtime but they knew that tonight they had only to keep quiet to be overlooked. They had trained themselves too to take cat-naps. Meg spread her arms on Alan's upraised knees, laid her cheek against them and fell asleep almost at once. Her curls were knotted where she had wiped her fingers. Alan made a mental note to disentangle them before Aunt Glad noticed: she was impatient with brush and comb. His own eyelids began to droop: the middle room, bathed now in gas-light, took on a striped and shimmering appearance where the lines of his lashes overlapped those of the silk fringe.

He was dimly aware of the room filling again. First of all his

grandmother, freshly washed and brushed, rubbing her hands together to smooth in the last of the lavender-scented salve she used after washing-up. She was followed by the younger women, bearing traces of further applications of 'powder' paper'. Then Molly and Victor arrived.

'Where is His Royal Highness?' Molly cried as she pushed her head round the door.

'Hush!' her aunt admonished.

'Well, he *isn't* here, is he?' her niece pouted. 'We'd have stayed longer if we had known!' She and Victor had gone to the Palais de Danse straight from work: they were carrying their dancing-shoes wrapped in brown paper. They hung up their coats and joined the circle of watchers – their eyes too fixed impatiently on the clock – though after a few minutes they edged their chairs away from the bright area beneath the gas-light until they were almost backing on to the bamboo table. Alan watched the customary manoeuvre as they sought each others' hands behind the backs of their chairs. Sometimes he leaned forwards and tickled the palms of their hands: they never gave him away, though Victor might, if the grown-ups were not looking, give him a good-natured cuff.

Mrs Blount arrived. Her coat had a wide collar heavy with fur so that it seemed about to slide off her shoulders. The drooping effect was heightened by the felt hat, shaped like an inverted crescent moon and – when she had discarded the coat by means of a single shrug – by the lines of her dress which were as straight as if it had been constructed from the staves of a barrel. It revealed new areas of flesh and bone, including knee-caps. Alan, now thoroughly awake, gazed in wonder at the circular lumps showing white through the silk stockings like ivory balls. When she walked across the room he half expected to hear a clicking noise such as came from the billiard-room at 'The Black Dog'. The spikiness of her appearance was offset by the contours of her arms. They were surprisingly smooth and rounded, firm

without being sinewy, endowed with a life of their own like graceful serpents. They afforded a complete contrast to those of his mother, which were rather fat above the elbows, and to those of Aunt Glad which were short and muscular as if toughened from elbowing her way through crowds.

He expected the women to be shocked by this example of extreme fashion, but the look which they bestowed on Mrs Blount seemed to say that this was exactly what they had expected. They treated her as two quite separate people. There were times when she was simply Aunt Glad's crony who would discuss child-bearing, marital problems and operations or retail gossip with as much gusto as anybody else. In her other rôle she was a denizen of the world of fashion, perfumes and thrilling speculations. They were not surprised to see her decked out in this way: they merely made the necessary mental adjustment that removed her from everyday surroundings and placed her in the pages of the magazines.

Even Alan's grandmother did no more than raise her eyebrows when Mrs Blount asked in a thrilling whisper: 'Is *he* here?'

'He *has* been – and gone!' Aunt Glad told her.

'Gone? You don't mean . . . ?'

'Oh no, he'll be back. He's gone out with Arthur and Ernie.'

'Oh.' Nobody paid any attention to the flush on Mrs Blount's face and the tremolo in her husky voice: these were merely the correct dramatic manifestations. The women had often spoken of Mrs Blount being 'sweet on' Uncle Hector. It was natural to associate the two. He also belonged to a realm of romance, peopled by tough sea-captains, pipe-smoking secret agents, and wielders of rod and gun on the Orinoco: it was only to be expected that a romantic 'interest' should exist between him and Mrs Blount. There was also the Uncle Hector who was 'poor Cora's husband'. He belonged only to the family. With him Mrs Blount could have no possible concern. It was assumed

that she accepted the division and that any emotion she might show was play-acting. And when Alan's grandmother leaned forward and said with a confidential sigh: 'He's got a Nurse Crossett,' she didn't even notice Mrs Blount wince.

'He's got a what?' she asked.

'A Nurse Crossett! Somebody he met on the troopship.' She pursed her lips and nodded her head significantly.

'Oh, I see.'

'And he hasn't once been to poor Cora's grave since the funeral!'

'Did he . . . did he mention *me*?' Mrs Blount asked.

'Good gracious, why should he?' She had been speaking of family matters not of make-believe

'I just . . . I thought he might. . . .

'Of *course* he did! Didn't he, Glad??' Alan's mother cried, her eyes shining; she was particularly fond of creating romantic fantasies about Mrs Blount

'Why *yes*,' her sister-in-law agreed perfunctorily and they began to talk about Uncle Hector's brief married life with 'poor Cora' among the splendours of Winthrop Avenue, while Mrs Blount sat on the edge of her chair straining her ears to catch the sounds from the road outside.

At last the rumble of Uncle Hector's voice was heard in the distance. A few seconds later the front door was thrown open so violently that the door-knob banged against the wall. This was followed by a loud 'Shh!' Alan's mother and Aunt Glad exchanged glances.

'I hope Ern hasn't been acting the giddy goat,' Aunt Glad said, with a glance in the direction of the machine drawer where she kept her darning-needles.

'I hope they haven't let Hector down,' her sister-in-law agreed. There was whispering and muffled laughter in the passage outside.

At last the door of the middle room was pushed open and a

head appeared round it. It was that of Alan's father. His face looked as if it were sunburnt. This had the effect of making his features look bigger, particularly his nose on the sides of which beads of perspiration had formed. His eyes sought those of his wife. 'It's all right!' he said in a loud voice. 'Now you're not to worry. I'm perfect . . . perfectly all right!'

These words were spoken not in the usual apologetic tone but in an affectionate, soothing one. The grin was no longer tentative, he was laughing to himself as if expecting his wife to share in the joke. She shook her head and made tut-tutting noises, but to his surprise Alan saw that the corners of her mouth were twitching.

His father advanced into the room. He caught sight of Mrs Blount, swept off his hat and shook her ceremoniously by the hand. Then he turned to the other women. 'Good evening, Mother. Good evening, Glad,' he said solemnly. When he faced his wife he was struck by the incongruity of greeting her in his own home. 'Hullo, Lil,' he chuckled. He made a vague gesture with his hand. 'It's quite all right! Absolutely all right!' Alan had never seen her look at his father in this way: her expression suggested a relationship of which he was utterly ignorant: the vagaries of grown-up behaviour, he reflected, were incredible.

Uncle Ernest now burst into the room, suddenly, as if propelled from behind. He was still wearing his cap: the peak protruded over his left ear. He snatched it off when he caught sight of Mrs Blount, gave a little bow, staggered and nearly fell. In order to camouflage this gaffe and to demonstrate his unimpaired agility he began to dance a jig. Alan's father applauded heartily. Meg went off into peal after peal of merriment. 'Daddy's funny!' she said in a stage whisper. Molly and Victor turned round and laid their fingers on their lips.

Fortunately the grown-ups were watching Aunt Glad. She glared at her husband. 'You fool!' she said. 'Oh you fool!' She

rummaged among the mending on her lap in search of a darning-needle.

But at this point Uncle Hector strode into the room. He placed himself between his brothers-in-law and flung an arm round each. His face was a brighter red, but he was at pains to demonstrate his command of himself. He pressed on the shoulders of his companions as if he meant to force them to the floor. 'They're all right!' he cried. 'They've been good boys.' He hugged them to him and then let go so suddenly that they staggered. He was smoking a cigar: when he smiled he held it between his white teeth. The aroma floated round the room. Alan wrinkled his nostrils: it blended perfectly with the smell of leather and bay rum and with that other smell he had noticed when Uncle Hector was using the little flask and which was unmistakably in evidence again.

Through the open door another presence could be discerned in the gloom of the passage. It coughed. Uncle Hector turned round.

'Come on in!' he called out. Great-uncle Charlie advanced as far as the doorway. He was wearing his coat and holding his hat, stick and gloves. He made a quick appraisal to assure himself that Uncle Hector was in control of the situation and came into the room. He shook his head and uttered a series of chuckles as if appealing for tolerance for a group of unruly school-boys.

'He's a lad! Oh, I can tell you he's a lad!' he exclaimed.

'Take your things off!' Uncle Hector shouted. 'Go on, take them off. You're staying for supper. I insist!' As an after-thought he turned to his sister-in-law: 'That's right, isn't it? - Glad - Lil?' He didn't wait for their reply.

'He dragged me out,' Great-uncle Charlie explained, 'without a by-your-leave. There was I peacefully reading the paper and they come along and start banging on the window!' Alan's grandmother inclined her head.

'I should have *thought* you might have set them a good example,' she said coldly. Uncle Hector hustled Great-uncle Charlie into the passage to dispose of his hat and coat. Mrs Blount got up.

'I think I had better be going,' she said. Uncle Hector noticed her for the first time. He took his cigar out of his mouth and gave her a long stare.

'You remember Mrs Blount, don't you?' Aunt Glad said.

'*Muriel*,' her sister-in-law added softly.

'Oh ah, howdy?' Uncle Hector replied, and then as he took in her appearance his eyes travelled along her bare arms and he continued more enthusiastically: 'Of course I remember! Hello . . . Muriel.' He discarded his boisterous manner as if he were throwing a hat on to a peg, took her hand and fixed his eyes on hers. 'You'll stay for supper, won't you?' he said in his softest tones. 'To please me?'

'Oh well . . .' she said and looked appealingly at Aunt Glad.

'Of course she'll stay,' her friend obliged, forbearing to mention that this had been the arrangement in any case. Mrs Blount quickly returned to her chair.

'Mrs Blount is very affable,' Alan's grandmother said. When she was on her dignity she used words which she had acquired in her Winthrop Avenue days. 'She is young and can tolerate the uproar. But *I* shall go to bed. I have had enough excitement – and disappointment. I *had* hoped for peace and quiet, today of all days . . .'

'Now wait a minute, Mam,' Uncle Hector cried. 'Wait a minute. I've got a surprise for you.' He went over to the door. 'Uncle Charlie!' he called out

'Hullo, my boy,' Great-uncle Charlie's voice came back, muffled by the bulging array of coats in the passage.

'Bring it in with you!' Uncle Hector shouted.

'Coming, my boy!' Uncle Hector stood in the doorway blocking Great-uncle Charlie from view. Something passed between

them. And then Uncle Hector whipped round and triumphantly held aloft the writing-cabinet.

He bent down and deposited it in his mother-in-law's lap. Her face turned pink: she put up her hand and patted the back of his head. 'Well done!' she said. '*That's* a good boy!'

Uncle Hector straightened himself. 'Couldn't do less,' he declared. 'There ~~was~~ poor Cora to think of. It's what *she* would have wanted!'

Gratification made his mother-in-law's voice tremulous.

'I hope there wasn't a lot of unpleasantness?' she asked.

The men burst out laughing. 'Go on – you tell them, Uncle Charlie,' Uncle Hector said.

'Oh, but it's *your* story, my boy.'

'No, no – I insist,' Uncle Hector said with a magnanimous gesture. Great-uncle Charlie cleared his throat.

'Oh, he's a lad! He's a lad!' he began. 'Our Hector didn't give them a chance to be pleasant *or* unpleasant. After they had dragged me out – and me sitting snug at home reading the paper – we went to the "Duke of York". And when we'd had a drink or two . . . nothing much you know.' He turned hastily to his sister and then to Mrs Blount. 'Well, when we'd wetted our whistles so to speak . . .'

'When we had a drop taken!' Uncle Hector interrupted, rolling the 'R'.

'When we had a drop taken!' his brothers-in-law imitated.

'When we had a drop taken,' Great-uncle Charlie agreed hurriedly, fearful that he was going to be robbed of the rôle of raconteur, 'Hector here ups and says "Relations! God spare a man from his relations!" . . . Present company excepted of course – we were talking in a general sort of way, you understand. "Now that I've swallowed a noggin or two of brandy" (he's used to brandy of course – they have it in the officers' mess – Arthur and Ernest here drank nothing but mild and bitter – just a drop of mild and bitter). "Now that I've doused

my tonsils," our Hector says, "why, I could tackle a whole ship's company of relations! Alive or dead!"'

Great-uncle Charlie came to an abrupt stop.

'Go on! Go on!' Uncle Hector urged. Great-uncle Charlie puffed out his cheeks in relief that no one had noticed the possible breach of tact and hurried on.

'When Hector's had another drink – only a single, only a single – he bangs his glass on the bar and, say he: "Now that the wandering sheep's returned to the fold . . ." "Wolf more like," I told him.' Great-uncle Charlie looked sternly at Uncle Ernest and Alan's father who had been tardy in reminiscent laughter. "Now that the sheep's returned to the fold," he says, "lead me to the rest of the flock. Especially if there are some likely ewes to tup" . . . You'll excuse the term, Mrs Blount, I'm sure – it's a *technical* one. . . . "I don't know about likely ewes," I tell him, "but how about an old nanny-goat?" "Who's an old nanny-goat?" Hector shouts, getting a bit nasty – he'd missed my meaning, you understand. "Why, your Aunt Gwen," I tells him. "Aunt by marriage only, thank God!" says Hector. "But all the same we'll give her and her old billy-goat a call." Well, off we went. They were just going to bed. "Keeping country hours" they call it – fact is they're too mean to keep the gas on. That lout Tom opened the door – he must be spending a holiday with them – it'll break their hearts to have to feed him though he's their only one. Well, he opened it about an inch, but Hector shoved his foot in quick as lightning. "Oo ur yew?" Tom said. . . .'

There was a burst of laughter at this imitation of Tom's accent.

' "I'm your long-lost uncle," Hector tell him. "A?" says Tom. "Straw!" say Hector. When it had sunk in Tom yells up the stairs: "Muvver! Dad! 'Ere's Uncle 'Ector." "Stop talkin' gibberish!" Gwen calls back. "'E's a norficer!" "'E says it's 'im." "Ask 'im wur 'e's bin!" his mother shouts back. "Wur

u bin?" Tom asks. "Tell her I've been to Mespot and back," Hector tells him. "'E says 'e's bin to Mespot!" Tom yells up the stairs. "Don't be filthy!" his mother yells back. Well, after a bit they came shuffling down the stairs. Edward was wearing that cardigan over his night-shirt – you know the one that looks like an old strawberry net. Gwen had her curlers in. You've never *seen* such curlers! I swear she was using meat-skewers. They stuck out all over her head like the handles of saucepans – I had half a mind to pop her on the stove!

This time the laughter was forthcoming. Great-uncle Charlie beamed, took a deep breath and continued.

'Well, Gwen and Edward came to the door. "This is a nonner!" Gwen says. "Thought you'd skeddaddled for good. Ain't you a norficer no more? Wur's yer yewniform?" "My batman's pressing it," Hector told her – she believed it too. "Don't know where they'll put 'im in that poky 'ole," she says (begging your pardon, Lil). Well, they showed us straight into the parlour. First time it's been used since the Jubilee, I'll be bound! "Nex' time," she says to Hector, "wear yer yewniform an' give the neighbours a treat. . . . Unless, that is, yew bin unfrecked or wotever they calls it." Well, when she'd blown off some of the dust and snatched off the bits of sacking over the chairs she asks us to sit down. "Git the wine," she says to Edward. "Git the wot?" he says, staring at her as if she'd gone potty. "The wine, you idiot!" she snaps back at him. He scratches his head and goes off to the kitchen. While he's gone Gwen gets down on her knees in front of the china-cabinet, unlocks the door and takes out some wine-glasses. She gives them a rub with her dressing-gown – they needed it I can tell you: looked as if she'd kept tadpoles in them – then back comes Edward with a bottle. "Is this *wot* you mean?" he says. "I thought we was keepin' that for when the vicar calls." "Give it 'ere!" she says and snatches it from him. She pours out a glass for Hector, but she doesn't offer us any. "Hey!" I says, "what about your own flesh and blood?" She

looks at the bottle, shakes it, and pours out a thimbleful – rhubarb wine it was: tasted more like jollop. “*They’ve ’ad enough already!*” she says – meaning Arthur and Ernie. . . . Of course they’d only had a drop of mild and bitter.’

‘Only mild and bitter!’ his nephews chorused.

‘Well, Edward looks at the bottle with his eyes popping out. “Wot about *me*?” he says. “What about you?” “Well, ain’t you givin’ me none? I ain’t bin on the bend!” She gives him a look – and that’s all *he* got. Well, Gwen is just going to close the door of the china-cupboard when Hector spots Lil’s writing-cabinet tucked away among the glasses and bits of crockery. “Why, that’s Cora’s writing-cabinet,” he says, “the one she gave to Lil.” And before you could say Jack Robinson he’s snatched it out and is polishing it up with his handkerchief. “You won’t mind if I take it now, will you?” he says. “Thank you *ever* so much for looking after it!” And before they can find their tongues – Gwen was still on her knees in front of the china-cupboard, making sure Hector hadn’t broken anything when he took the writing-cabinet out – he’s back out in the passage with the cabinet tucked under his arm and us at his heels. “Hey!” Uncle Edward says, coming after us. “Hey! You can’t do that thur ’ere!” “Oh, but can’t I?” says Hector cool as a cucumber. “Don’t you know it belongs to me? Don’t you recall that I’m next of kin to the dear departed?” “But poor Cora said as I was to ’ave it,” Gwen comes whining out into the passage. “Then poor Cora’s changed her mind,” Hector says. “Ta-ta, all!” “’Old on a minute!” Edward screeches and catches hold of Hector’s sleeve. “Yew ain’t gettin’ away with it as easy as that.” And with that he hollers out: “Tom! Tom! Yer pore old dad’s bein’ robbed!” “Thieves! Murder!” Gwen starts screeching. Tom comes belting in from the kitchen. “Wot are yew doin’ to me mum an’ dad?” he says. “I’m taking back something that they pinched,” Hector says to him “Want to make something of it?” “’It ’im! ’It ’im!” Gwen yells. “Oh,

that wouldn't be fair!" Toms says. "The pore feller's not sober." "That's right!" says Hector. "I'm drunk" (of course you understand that he was as sober as a judge – so were we all – just a few glasses of mild and bitter). . . .

'Only mild and bitter!' Alan's father and Uncle Ernest chorused once more.

'Well, Hector says to them: "I'm drunk." Then he screws up his face and looks so fierce I'm nearly frightened out of my wits myself. "And what's more!" he roars, "I'm *fighting drunk*!" And he waves his fist under Tom's nose. Tom lets out a yell and jumps back like a scalded cat. "Murder! Murder!" Gwen yells again and they all fall into each others arms! And while they're sorting themselves out we open the door and there we are back in the street with the writing-cabinet all safe and sound!'

Great-uncle Charlie finished amid a burst of applause. He retired modestly, pushing Uncle Hector into the middle of the room. All eyes turned on him. United in hostility towards their stock villains, the family regarded him with adulation. His mother-in-law's dissatisfaction with regard to 'poor Cora' was dispelled. With one stroke he had established himself at the centre of the household: his brothers-in-law merely caught some of the reflected glory. Even Molly and Victor came out of their enchanted cubicle to join in the fresh outburst of applause as their grandmother ceremoniously handed the writing-cabinet into her daughter-in-law's keeping. 'There you are, Lil,' she said. '*Hector* brought it back!'

In their excitement Alan and Meg had ventured too far out of their territory. They were spotted before they could retreat. 'What dogs do I see in *that* kennel?' Great-uncle Charlie cried and they were hauled to their feet and handed round for the usual embraces. Tonight these were particularly hearty and there were new odours from the men's mouths and moustaches. They had the contented feeling of being at one with the family,

impregnated in the atmosphere of rejoicing. For Alan there was a further happiness. Uncle Ernest had hoisted Meg on to his shoulders in order to carry her to bed – and then Uncle Hector himself stepped forward and with a single movement as if he were lifting a dumb-bell placed him on his right shoulder. It made a wide and muscular seat: Alan was reminded of the picture of St Christopher in one of his school books.

In the dark bedroom Alan and Meg felt as far away from the middle room as if they were at the top of a lighthouse. The clatter of dishes as supper was eaten, the murmur of voices and the sudden bursts of laughter like trains rushing out of tunnels, reached them as if across water. They clung to these sounds until their ears grew tired and gradually let go. Soon they were cut off in the warm cocoon of the bed, drifting towards the shadowy voices and laughter of sleep as from one sea to another.

Meg drifted the faster. Alan tried to hold her back to discuss the day's events. Her only comment was to repeat: 'He called her "Mam"!'. Then she yawned, curled herself into a ball and fell asleep.

Was that all she remembered? The question did not make sense. Her observation was as active as his own: probably she had taken in more than he had done. But she did not remember in the same way. She felt no necessity to send her thoughts like trick cyclists racing in and out among the happenings of the day. She took it in as a piece of moss absorbs the dew or a stone the rays of the sun. She did not have to vex herself with searching for a meaning or a pattern. She could pick on a trivial incident without any sense of incongruity. 'He called her Mam' seemed to her a perfectly adequate memorial.

And did she understand what the people in the middle room were feeling? Again her awareness was of a different kind. In the world of childhood to which, until recently, he himself had unequivocally belonged, the only separate individuals were companions of one's own age. But in the world of adults even

those one knew best were not so much recognisable individuals as areas, with their own atmospheres, contours and vegetation, where one wandered, sometimes in contentment, sometimes in distress. They were not separate picces which like a Chinese puzzle might be capable of a thousand different solutions and with which one might have a thousand different involvements.

He thought these things without having the words for them. But Meg felt them without having to think. Only a few months ago he had been in the same state: it seemed to him ^{one} of bliss and innocence. It was hardly possible that so brief a period of time could so thoroughly divide. A burst of laughter reached up and carried him like a wave into sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

There was to be no Indian summer. Already in the second week of September it was cold. The sun shone but there were none of those sudden bursts which blaze more fiercely on the cheeks by contrast with the chill of the air. It cast a pallid yellow light like that of a candle: Alan and Meg could look straight at it. There was no feeling of sheaves laid gently down one after the other to receive their final toasting. There was rather an indecent hurry to shovel the evidences of summer aside. In the last week of August the plants in the back garden had reached their maximum height and density: but instead of staying there placidly surveying the scene they began to lean and snap and drift. Even the Michaelmas daisies had no staying power and added their mauve petals to those of the dahlias and hollyhock blossoms which lay like discarded pink and yellow ice-cream cones among fibrous stalks. Early frosts cut through the garden like hungry geese, thinning out the vegetation and lopping off several inches of grass. Even the bonfires behaved differently. Instead of an autumnal smoulder, with the occasional opening of a ruby eye, they burned angrily as if determined to blaze a trail as quickly as possible to the heart of winter. The smoke had none of the usual aromatic nostalgia: it stung the nostrils like frost. The local farmers' predictions, it seemed, were about to be fulfilled: they were glad they had collected the harvest early.

The privet hedge had grown skimpy. The last of the white flowers which a few weeks ago had been compact as acorns, were thin and bedraggled; the tiny stems showed through like green-fly. The leaves of the hedge had lost their sheen and were

beginning to curl. The twigs turned dark: the stouter branches lost their hazel and olive colours: when one scratched them they no longer disclosed a vivid green and the white wood dried quickly as if the sap had drawn inwards like the horns of a snail. When Alan and Meg sat in the den the wind chilled their uplifted knees: it was like sitting beneath an umbrella whose fabric had blown away. It was difficult to preserve the illusion of privacy when Mr Poole peered at their backs through the palings and on one occasion gathered his daughters round him and indicated them as examples of idleness and self-deception. Or when Uncle Hector strolled down the garden, hands in pockets, deep in thought – or seeking an escape from his mother-in-law's exhortations – and stopped in front of the den, big legs apart, the knee-caps regarding them like eyes. Fortunately Uncle Hector always left before the spell was completely broken, snorting or chuckling according to mood.

The den had lost some of its magic for another reason. Alan and Meg had caught German measles towards the end of the holidays. The few days in bed comparing spots had been more enjoyable than otherwise, but they were not considered well enough to return to school. School was little more than a stone's throw away. It took about five minutes to reach the entrance in Ladysmith Street, but the playground adjoined the Cowchers' and Travers' gardens. At playtime the voices of their school-fellows came over the wall. They imagined that every burst of laughter and every cat-call was directed against their truancy. Sometimes indeed some of their friends did call out their names. They pretended not to hear. On one occasion someone threw a ball over the wall. It landed almost opposite the den. They regarded it as if it were an unexploded bomb. 'Send it back! Send it back!' a chorus of voices cried. They were not to be tempted. It was left to Uncle Hector on one of his prowls to return it with a powerful lob. The voices, impressed by this evidence of a forceful adult presence, fell silent.

The dreadful stillness that descended when the whistle blew was even worse. They envisaged the abrupt ending of games and confidences, the hasty pocketing of balls, tops and half-eaten apples. Then came the barks of command and the dispirited shuffling of feet as the children were marched back to their classrooms. And the silence immediately afterwards was worst of all. At that moment they could not believe that their parents' notes would have placated Mr Cartwright, the headmaster. They expected to see his angry red face with the bald head on which the veins stood out like the lines on the phrenologist's model cranium at the fair, peering at them over the wall. The inroads of autumn seemed particularly merciless, the hedge a flimsy protection. Those piercing eyes would surely search them out through twig and branch and leaf as those of the Creator had discovered Adam and Eve. Unless, Alan told himself, Uncle Hector was in the garden at the time. Even Mr Cartwright would be no match for Uncle Hector.

School for Alan and Meg was a miserable irrelevance. It passed their comprehension why parents, otherwise so tolerant, should inflict it upon them. They did their best to conform. They learned what they had to learn, expelling the most distasteful parts as quickly as possible as a fish ejects waste food. They chanted their lessons and performed their exercises in order to avoid the unpleasant consequences of failure, rather than out of any conviction. There was hardly a moment of school life that had any meaning for them. The only period they looked forward to was the singing lesson, because then the whole school assembled and they were no longer in separate classrooms. They saw each other's faces across the hall as flat white blurs, each with a trembling O in the middle like an oscillating letter in a neon sign: but the wails that proceeded from these orifices at least spelled their imminent release. Most of the songs were supposed to be of a rollicking nature: they were all rendered as threnodies to the

dying day, and to the small deaths taking place inside them. Never were 'Ho's!' and 'Ha's!' uttered with such little gusto.

During the rest of the school hours they seldom met. Meg was in the Infants' Department and their playtimes did not coincide. When they encountered each other in their respective files they regarded each other askance out of the corners of their eyes, as if they wert simulacra of their real selves. Even when they met outside the school after the obsequies of the singing lesson they did not speak at first. But after they had walked a few yards Meg's hand would seek Alan's and they would break into a run. It was not until they were back in the den or in the corner of the middle room that they felt their bodies and souls knit together again.

They were half inclined now to attribute the attenuation of their leafy covering less to the early autumn than to the wind that blew, as if off an iceberg, from beyond the school wall. When their mothers summoned them they emerged with unusual alacrity. The parental command was preferable to the idea of that wrathful face peering over the wall: prompt obedience might even exorcise it.

'You're to visit the Cowchers,' Aunt Glad announced. 'No, not that way!' she expostulated when Meg dropped on hands and knees and started to crawl through the gap in the Cowchers' hedge. 'It's a proper visit. You'll have to get washed and changed.' Meg looked puzzled. Her glimpse through the hedge had reminded her of a mystery that had been exercising them recently. As a rule the advent of autumn kept Mr Cowcher busier than ever: there had been occasions when he had lain in wait with dustpan and brush for every falling leaf. Now there were not only leaves but even weeds: the flower-beds were dotted with fallen blossoms. The red, white and blue asters had outgrown their stakes of which Mr Cowcher kept a large supply in carefully graduated lengths: usually he measured these every few days against his plants as if they were children outgrowing

their clothes. Tendrils of wild convolvulus, like filigree work, had begun to chase both stalk and stake.

Meg and Alan had first noticed these signs of neglect about the time their parents began discussing Mrs Cowcher's 'condition'. A few days ago they knew they had received some peculiarly adult piece of news. There had been the usual dropping of voices at their approach, the whispered comments launched across their heads, the pursing of the lips, raising of eyebrows, shaking of heads, and on the part of the women a curious stretching of the neck followed by a tucking-in of the chin, like ducks swallowing snails. There was the usual spelling out of certain words and the silent enunciation of others, with a great display of lips, teeth and tongues – a performance that fascinated Alan and Meg especially when they saw from the nods of the recipients that they had been successful in their lip-reading. They knew the topics reserved for these methods. They included funerals, operations and babies.

They were not unprepared, therefore, when their mothers informed them that the visit was 'because of Mrs Cowcher's baby'. They had been expecting its arrival for some time. But for the Cowchers to invite them into their house was an astonishing break with tradition.

'Did it come in the night?' Meg asked. There was one of the ludicrous hesitations that attended the subject.

'Well, it came,' Aunt Glad said at length, 'but it didn't stay.'

'Perhaps it didn't like Mr and Mrs Cowcher?' Meg suggested.

'Oh dear! You mustn't say anything like that!'

'Then where's it gone?'

'I expect it died,' Alan told her. He knew that he had interpreted the meaning glances correctly. Meg was thinking of the neglected garden: there must be a connection. 'Perhaps Mr Cowcher's going to let us help him, bury it!' she cried.

'Do you think it's all right to let them go?' Aunt Glad asked the other women. 'Won't they make it worse?'

'It's just that they want to be with children,' her sister-in-law said: her expression softened as she realised the significance of the unexpected summons.

It would be the first time that any of the inmates of Number Twenty had been inside their neighbours' house. Nobody thought any worse of the Cowchers for this: every neighbourhood had its solitary couples, who liked 'to keep themselves to themselves'. But Alan and Meg felt their hearts thumping as they approached the Cowchers' front door. Before they could knock, it was flung open. Mr Cowcher stood looking down at them. He had discarded his coat: it made him almost a stranger and they missed the buttonhole. He was wearing his railway guard's thick blue trousers, and a waistcoat with a silver watch-chain and medallion stretched across it. He was also wearing a stiff white collar and a black knitted tie.

On his feet were a pair of carpet slippers. These disconcerted Alan and Meg. They had never before seen him without his big black boots. They had dome-shaped toe-caps as hard as iron and so highly polished that when he was working in his garden the flowers were reflected in them: it had always been a source of wonder how he could step so daintily in them across his lawn and among the flower-beds: he scorned to wear gardening boots as if pointing out that *his* garden was never dirty enough for them. The discarding of them now struck Alan and Meg as a melancholy commentary upon its decline.

They looked up into his face. The fat cheeks had stiffened. The brown eyes which usually darted at them in simulated exasperation were expressionless.

'Wipe your feet!' Hand in hand they scuffed on the coconut mat outside the front door, postponing the moment of entry as long as possible. 'That's enough,' Mr Cowcher said. They entered. The predominant smell in the passage was that of polish. Everything was freshly cleaned. A circular mirror in a glittering brass frame hung on the wall next to an oak bracket

for clothes brushes. Below these was a cylindrical stand, made out of a section of drainpipe painted a bright green. The handles of the walking-sticks and umbrellas looked as if they too had been polished.

Mr Cowcher led the way to the stairs. Alan and Meg hung back. He turned and looked at their scared faces. A spasm ran across his face. He held out his hands. Reluctantly they let go of each other and stood on either side of him. The stairs were too narrow to accommodate three abreast. Mr Cowcher fell back a step, holding them before him: the rough serge of his trousers rubbed against their legs. He paused outside the bedroom door and knocked. 'Come in!' said a weak voice. Mr Cowcher pushed open the door. Alan and Meg entered on tiptoe.

There was something remarkable evanescent about Mrs Cowcher. 'You can't get so much as a squeak out of her,' the neighbours said. Weeks went by without them even being aware of her presence. She was so slight and her movements so quick that she hardly seemed to dent the atmosphere. She was like a late swallow dipping across the sky – you are aware of it out of the corner of your eye but a moment later you are not certain whether you saw it or not. Passers-by might get a glimpse at the window of a small face with bright eyes and frizzy black curls protruding from the edge of a chintz mob-cap, or of a little figure in a frilly apron darting to the gate to shake out a mat or a feather-duster: a few yards farther on they would begin to doubt the evidence of their senses. Tradesmen who had found their goods whisked away, the money deposited in their hands, the change extracted and the door closed all in the twinkling of an eye had been known to forget whether they had called and to knock a second time. When she went out shopping, carrying a basket large enough for her to have curled up inside, she glided down the road and in and out of the crowds and the shops as if she had been a ghost. Her curtains, knocker and door-step put those of her most fastidious neighbours to shame.

When did she do it? they asked. They couldn't remember having *seen* her. It was as if a Robin Goodfellow inhabited the house. Equally mysterious was the way in which she learned about every misfortune in the neighbourhood. She was the first to appear with flowers or fruit, or bowls of soup, thrusting them into the hands of whoever answered the door and slipping away before they could express their thanks – though in serious cases she had been known to help with the nursing.

At first Alan and Meg could hardly make her out in the big double bed: her hand lay on the counterpane like a brown leaf: the frizzy hair trailed across the pillow like tendrils of ivy and her body seemed as insubstantial as thistledown.

'The kids next door,' Mr Cowcher announced. 'Go on! Go on! Speak to her!' He gave them a prod in the back. The figure in the bed turned its head. Mr. Cowcher walked over to the window and stood looking out. Mrs Cowcher lay on her side for several minutes her eyes fixed on Alan and Meg. Alan felt uncomfortable: there was something hostile in the stare.

'How do you do?' he said. Meg sat on the side of the bed and began to talk in her bustling slightly truculent tones.

'You're ill?' she said. 'I s'pose it was that baby? Was it naughty? Did you send it away?' Mr Cowcher at the window stirred. Mrs Cowcher regarded Meg intently.

'P'raps you've hidden it?' Meg continued. She peered round the room: then she laughed. 'But we'd hear it crying, wouldn't we?'

'I told you,' Alan said frowning at her. 'I expect it died.'

Mr Cowcher turned round and faced the bed. Mrs Cowcher slowly nodded her head: a tear rolled down her cheek. She held out her hands. After a moment's hesitation Alan and Meg took them: it was like holding petals. She sat up: her husband hurried forward and arranged the pillows at her back. A little colour came into her cheeks. 'Yes, it died,' she said.

'What a pity!' Meg exclaimed. 'Was it *pretty*?'

'Yes,' Mrs Cowcher said. 'It had a tiny nose and black hair, just like Mr Cowcher's.'

Alan's and Meg's heads jerked round: their eyes travelled over Mr Cowcher's rubicund face, his shining forehead and bald head and came to rest on the tufts of grizzled hair above his ears. 'Just like Mr Cowcher's!' Alan said politely.

'Tell us some more about the baby,' Meg urged.

'It was a boy,' Mrs Cowcher began, but at that moment there was a subdued 'cheep!' from a corner of the room.

'What is it?' Alan whispered.

'It's Joey,' Mrs Cowcher said.

'What's Joey?' Meg asked.

'Let them see.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, dear.'

'It won't disturb you?'

'Not now, dear.'

Mr Cowcher removed a green cloth, disclosing a cage with a canary which immediately burst into song. It was not the usual yellow colour but a blend of mustard, orange, cream and cinnamon. It was remarkably smooth as if the feathers had been matched by a craftsman, and lagged on to the body one by one. The canaries in the houses of other neighbours were perky little creatures but they were usually rather scruffy, with crooked legs and feathers awry. They didn't look much different from the hens that scratched in the back gardens: some of them might have been hens shrunk to convenient indoor size.

Joey's beauty affected Alan and Meg in the same way as their first sight of a Red Admiral butterfly, their first dawn over the chimneys of the jam factory and their first glimpse of Firefly. He was long and slender. His head was lifted so that from the tip of his tail to the tip of his beak he described an almost straight line, except for the swelling at his throat. He was shaped

like a yellow iris when it is still dewy and folded. He had the same silky lightness and tilted at the same angle. And all the time song poured from his throat. They almost expected the vibration to lift him off his perch and project him through the top of the cage, the roof of the house and into the sky beyond.

Mr Cowcher watched their faces. 'Isn't he a beauty, eh?' he said softly and replaced the cloth. Joey's song died down and was extinguished.

'The wife's been ill,' Mr Cowcher said. 'A shock . . . shock to us both. . . . She has to rest now. But we'll take Joey's cloth off altogether soon.'

'Not when the gas is lit,' Alan said, anxious to demonstrate his knowledge of canaries.

'No, but all day tomorrow perhaps, eh?' Mr Cowcher said, turning to his wife. She nodded, smiled and yawned.

'Off you go now!' Mr Cowcher said, sounding more like his old self. They moved towards the door.

'Perhaps you'll see Joey again one day!' Mrs Cowcher said in a dreamy voice: she was nearly asleep.

Alan hesitated by her bedside. He did not take her suggestion seriously. Today's visit had been exceptional. He knew it would be a long time, if ever, before he entered their house again. People did not change their basic characteristics as suddenly as all that. He was glad it was so. Grown-ups were sufficiently incalculable in their actions: it was something that one could rely on the steadfastness of their habits. But he felt that something else was called for. He looked pleadingly at Meg but she had already reached the door. He hung his head and blushed. He managed to blurt out: 'The baby - a pity!'

Mrs Cowcher's eyes were closed but she reached out and squeezed his hand.

'You've still got Joey,' Meg said from the doorway. 'Mind you've good to Joey!'

In the middle room Uncle Hector was lying back in the basket chair which creaked in time to his contented breathing, a cup of tea on one knee, a plate with a slice of fruit cake on the other, and a plate of muffins at his side ('afternoon tea' had become more substantial of late).

He was telling one of his stories. Alan's mother watched him with a rapt expression. She imagined herself taking part in all the situations he described. Aunt Glad was an audience in herself. At every climax she let out a gasp and brought the palm of her hand up to her mouth. At the amusing passages her eyes and teeth flashed: she appealed to her sister-in-law or to Mrs Blount by clasping their arms or slapping them. Mrs Blount sat in a graceful pose – elbows resting on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands. In this position her sallow face assumed soft shadows and its outlines were compressed into a symmetrical oval in which her eyes, fixed on Uncle Hector, looked big and appealing. The other women glanced at her every now and then as if to admire her performance. But Alan knew that though grown-ups might dissemble their unhappiness, their eyes gave them away.

Uncle Hector's story was about a second mate whom he had suspected of dishonesty.

'In point of fact,' he was saying (this was a favourite phrase), 'I had told the owners a dozen times. I *warned* them!' He banged his fist into the palm of his hand as he always did at this point. '“The man's got pointed ears,” I told them. You can't deceive me. I've come across it too often. Never trust a man with pointed ears.' He looked round with a bland expression, his eyes wide, inviting them to admire his wisdom and knowledge of the world.

'I had a dream once,' he went on. 'It was about a man with pointed ears. So I knew straight away.' Most of Uncle Hector's anecdotes contained a hint of the occult or the supernatural. He introduced this element with a weary shrug as if it was a

burden he had to carry. 'We "men who go down to the sea in ships" are always psychic,' he would say.

'But of course the fools wouldn't listen!' Aunt Glad made a clicking noise to express her sympathetic disgust. Alan's mother stared ahead with a vacant expression. She was, Alan knew, imagining herself in the shipping office with its charts and maps and mysterious objects under glass cases, including, she felt sure, a binnacle, whatever that was, addressing a man with white hair and a paunch who had never been to sea himself, but who was always on the look-out for a chance to cheat his brave skippers, who broke the regulations and sent them to sea in rotting hulks in order to get the insurance money, who . . . her fantasy easily kept pace with her brother-in-law's narrative, often over-topping it like yeast swelling out of a dish. When she recounted the story afterwards it emerged with all kinds of additions and embellishments. Alan and Meg often preferred her versions to the originals.

'Sure enough,' Uncle Hector was saying, 'I found out in the end. In Pernambuco, it was . . .' Alan watched his mother's lips shaping the strange syllables. 'You see, he got hold of the key of the strong-box somehow. Caught him in the act of opening it. Red handed. Pulled a knife on me—in point of fact. But I let him have it with *this*!' Aunt Glad let out a squawk as he suddenly thrust out his clenched fist for their inspection. It was as big as a cauliflower: the knuckles shone like ham-bones.

'It was then that I noticed his ears,' he said, 'and I remembered that dream. . . .'

'Oh, but you said you saw his ears at the very beginning!' Alan's mother interrupted in a disappointed voice. She had a habit of appearing to lose the thread of a story and then pouncing on an inconsistency.

'Well, it was then that I *remembered*!' Uncle Hector said testily. 'My dream was *confirmed*.'

'Tell us about the tent in Mesopot,' Aunt Glad said. 'Oh, this will make you shiver!' she told Mrs Blount. Uncle Hector leaned back in his chair and smiled benevolently.

'Well, in point of fact, it was near Basra,' he began. 'The outfit was under canvas. I'd arrived late and was assigned to a tent on the outskirts of the camp. My batman dropped my bags at the entrance to the tent and saluted. I thought he gave me rather a queer look. Seemed anxious to get away. Anyway, I pushed open the flap and entered. There were three other officers there. They stared at me. "Hello!" one of them said. "So you've decided to risk it!" "They reckon the hoodoo's worked off!" said another. Of course I couldn't make out *what* they were getting at. Then they introduced themselves. "Captain Blood," said the first, and grinned. "Lieutenant D'Acth!" said the second. . . .'

'It's spelled d-apostrophe-a-c-t-h,' Alan's mother explained excitedly to Mrs Blount. 'But it's pronounced *death*! You see? Blood, death, and . . . Oh, go on, Hector!'

'They began laughing,' Uncle Hector resumed, glaring at her. "'And who might you be?" I said to the third. He was a long thin fellow with a white face. He looked at me for a bit and then he said, in a hollow voice—like this'—and Uncle Hector dropped his voice so that it sounded as if it were reverberating round a vault, "I am Captain Coughin!"'

Alan's mother was about to interrupt with another of her explanations, but Uncle Hector hurried on:

'Well, they looked at me,—and suddenly I had a premonition. I *knew* I oughtn't to stay! So I picked up my bags and walked out. I told the accommodation wallah that he'd better think again. Well, they found me another billet—and then they told me that the last four officers assigned to that tent had picked up some sort of tropical bug and died within a week! What do you think of *that*?''

It was getting dusk. Aunt Glad drew the curtains. She did

not light the gas: she hoped that the semi-darkness, with the fire sending shadows across the walls, would encourage Uncle Hector to tell some more of his spooky tales. There was a version of the one he had just finished which she preferred. He sometimes told it after supper when he and his brothers-in-law had been out 'wetting their whistles'. In this the tent on the edge of the encampment was a much more sinister affair, and Uncle Hector left in a more dramatic fashion. And when the next day he made his way to the spot — lo and behold, there was no sign of the tent and no one had ever heard of Captain Blood, Lieutenant D'Aeth and Captain Coughin!

Meg tended to get nightmares after this story. Alan would have to get out of bed and light the candle. Usually Molly would also wake up, and under Meg's directions they would take it in turns to carry the candle from one corner to another. She would blink her eyes as the beams of the candle-flame tangled with her eyelashes. She would peer at their long shadows on the walls. 'Under the bed now,' she would say. 'And now that corner. Alan, you've forgotten the corner by the door! Molly! You've haven't looked under *your* bed!' Eventually night fear would pass into whim; Molly would bang the candle down and exclaim: 'You're not going to play *me* up any more, madam!' Meg would give a half smile, turn on her side and fall asleep.

Uncle Hector did not respond to the atmosphere this time. He appeared anxious to switch proceedings to a different channel. 'Lieutenant D'Aeth,' he said abruptly, 'died of malaria not long after. It was I who carried the news to his widow. . . .' He paused significantly. The women scenting a romantic motif stirred. 'Poor woman! Poor woman!' Uncle Hector sighed, and shook his head. 'A beautiful gel,' he said, 'a really beautiful gel.' In tender moments he always used this pronunciation. The women loved it. They associated it with panelled libraries, leather arm-chairs, whisky and soda, gun-racks, mahogany

dining-tables, cigars and decanters of port as they knew them from the cinema, the advertisements in the magazines, and occasional glimpses during visits to friends who were 'in service'.

'Get along with you! You and your "beautiful gels",' Aunt Glad said. 'What do *you* know about "beautiful gels"?' Uncle Hector smiled enigmatically.

'Well?' she continued impatiently. 'What was it about that widow that was so wonderful?'

'She had the most beautiful legs I have ever seen!' Uncle Hector replied fervently. Aunt Glad gave an uncertain giggle. Alan's mother pulled her skirt farther over her knees.

Uncle Hector deposited his cup, which had just been filled for the fourth time, on the trolley, and spread his hands, palms downwards, on his knees. The hair ran along the lines of the knuckles like furry caterpillars: his knees under the tightly-stretched blue serge looked like boulders. He half closed his eyes. His mouth turned down at the corners. He waited for his cue.

'Oh, you're the one to know about legs, I've no doubt!' Aunt Glad cried, and abashed at her own forwardness gave a high-pitched laugh.

'I know *exactly* how to judge a good pair of legs,' Uncle Hector announced. He waited patiently.

'Well?' Alan's mother ventured at length, and blushed.

'There is one certain test . . .'

'Yes?' Aunt Glad breathed.

'You need a sixpence.'

'A *sixpence*? Whatever for?'

'Give me a sixpence and I'll show you.'

'Find your own sixpence!'

'I haven't got any change.'

Alan's mother and Aunt Glad looked at each other and

looked away again. Then shamefaced they began searching in their handbags, but without success.

'What about you, Mrs Blount?' Uncle Hector said, emphasising the 'Mrs'.

'I don't think so,' she muttered.

There was an explosion from the basket chair as Uncle Hector leaned forward and snatched Mrs Blount's bag. It was made of black brocade, with a floral pattern and a jewelled clasp. Uncle Hector opened it roughly as if he were tearing open an envelope. Mrs Blount stared at him unbelievably. Then she got up from her chair.

'Could I have my bag?' she said.

'Not until I've found a sixpence!' Uncle Hector replied.

'Please let me have it,' she said. Uncle Hector shook his head. He leaned this way and that as she tried to snatch it. She stumbled and nearly fell across his knees. He steadied her with one hand, holding the bag at arm's length with the other. Mrs Blount glanced down at the hand clasping her arm, shuddered, quietly disengaged herself and walked back to her chair. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad regarded her uncertainly: in order to hide their confusion they began to laugh. Alan hated their shrill noise.

Uncle Hector began to lay the contents of the bag one by one on his knees: a lace-edged handkerchief, a packet of 'powder papers', several hairpins. He extracted a black moire purse. 'The exchequer at last!' The other women exchanged puzzled glances. There was something about the scene that did not fit in with their conception of Mrs Blount and her relationship with their brother-in-law. It was not really romantic at all.

Uncle Hector continued his examination of the purse.

'Why! You've got one after all!' he cried, holding up a sixpence. 'You must have forgotten, Mrs Blount!'

'Now then, what's a sixpence got to do with it?' Aunt Glad said.

Uncle Hector held the coin between finger and thumb. He tilted his head to one side, and screwed up his eyes.

'A woman with really beautiful legs,' he said, speaking very deliberately, 'can stand upright and hold a sixpence between her legs . . . in three places. . . .'

Alan's mother gasped. Even Aunt Glad looked scared. At last she ventured in a small voice: 'Three place?'

'That's right!' Uncle Hector's mouth turned down in a sardonic grin.

Aunt Glad struggled to maintain a respectable silence. The effort was too much. 'Where?' she breathed.

'In between the ankles: in between the calves: and in between the knees,' Uncle Hector announced briskly, and added with a flash of white teeth: 'That's enough to be getting on with!'

Alan's mother and Aunt Glad pondered: embarrassment gave way to curiosity. They cast covert glances at their own legs and at each other's. Uncle Hector put the sixpence in his waistcoat pocket. He took out his cigar-case, extracted a cigar, bit off the end, and placed it in the saucer of his cup. He lit the cigar and leaned back in his chair. He appeared to have lost interest in the proceedings.

'Could you, Lil?' Aunt Glad whispered.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Bet you couldn't!'

'Oh yes, I could.'

Mrs Blount sat very still.

'There's only one way to find out' Uncle Hector emerged from behind the blue skeins of cigar smoke. He sounded bored, as if it was no longer any concern of his. The two women continued to argue in whispers.

'Well, if you can, *I* can!' Aunt Glad exclaimed in a louder voice.

'Go on, prove it!'

Aunt Glad's eyes flashed. 'Hector, where's that sixpence?'

Uncle Hector produced the coin and handed it over with alacrity. Aunt Glad retired to a corner: Alan's mother stood in front of her. 'Now then! Now then!' Uncle Hector expostulated: he used a mild, avuncular voice. 'Why all this false modesty, eh? Between friends and relations. What's the harm in a little experiment?' Aunt Glad looked at him over her shoulder. 'Come off!' he cried. 'Over here on the mat! . . . Or do you want me to come *and* fetch you?' He took the cigar out of his mouth and gave a sudden grin. Half frightened, half intrigued, Aunt Glad advanced into the centre of the room. She stood, head lowered, while her sister-in-law inserted the sixpence between her ankles. 'There you are!' Aunt Glad cried triumphantly.

'Ah, but *now's* the test,' Uncle Hector said. Gingerly Aunt Glad raised her skirt a few inches. Her sister-in-law pushed the sixpence in between her calves. It balanced for a moment, then fell out on the other side. Aunt Glad stamp'd her foot. 'Let *me* try!' she cried. She snatched the sixpence and inserted the coin: it disappeared as easily as if she had been posting a letter. Her face was flushed, her hair dishevelled: her black eyes snapped in exasperation.

'Well, I bet the next is all right!' she cried. She thrust the sixpence into her sister-in-law's hand, and standing upright snatched up her skirt with an angry gesture. Her knee-caps through her stockings were surprisingly pale and fragile like egg-shells. She held the sixpence between them quite comfortably.

'There you are!' she cried, looking Uncle Hector straight in the eye.

'Ah, but you see,' he replied, 'the whole point is that you have to be able to hold it in all three places. *That* is the test!'

'Exactly!' Alan's mother agreed.

'Well, if you're so smug, let's see *you* do it!' Aunt Glad snapped. Alan's mother hesitated and then with a slow,

almost haughty movement she drew her skirt above her knees.

'Now *that's* more like it,' Uncle Hector said, taking his cigar from his mouth. She had scrubbed the floors that morning and her knees were slightly discoloured: there was a small bruise near the right knee. But her legs were much more shapely than Aunt Glad's: Alan was not sure whether to be angry or proud.

Aunt Glad knelt down and inserted the sixpence in turn between her sister-in-law's ankles, calves and knees. It stayed there quite easily. Aunt Glad carried out the test a second time: she pushed hard; Alan's mother, by holding her legs tightly together, resisted her efforts to get the sixpence through.

'You see,' she said, letting her skirt fall. She returned to her chair: she sat very upright, her hands folded in her lap. She did not look at Uncle Hector. Aunt Glad regarded her with a scowl. 'Here, let me try again!'

She braced herself and leaned against the mantelpiece. This time she managed to hold the sixpence between both her calves and her knees.

'You're cheating!' Uncle Hector cried. 'You're crossing your legs!' He broke into a bellow of laughter. Aunt Glad looked as if she was going to cry, then she changed her mind and she, too, burst into peals of laughter. She tried again and again. Soon the two women, with flushed faces and hair awry, their embarrassment forgotten, were pulling up their skirts, snatching the sixpence from each other and chasing it with excited squeals when it rolled away. Uncle Hector laughed until he choked.

Mrs Blount had been sitting absolutely still. Now she lowered her head and stared down at the handbag in her lap. Uncle Hector's mouth and the clefts round it made their characteristic downward curves.

'What about Mrs Blount?' he said softly.

'Yes! It's your turn, Muriel!' Aunt Glad cried.

'No, please . . .' Mrs Blount replied in an almost inaudible voice.

'Why ever not? Lil's getting a swelled head. I bet *you* could do it!'

'Oh, I'm *quite* sure Mrs Blount could show the rest of you a thing or two – couldn't you . . . Muriel?' Uncle Hector said.

'I . . . I don't know . . .' Mrs Blount faltered.

'Well, now's your chance!' Aunt Glad retrieved the sixpence from the corner near the door where it had just rolled from between her own calves.

'You . . . you must excuse me,' Mrs Blount whispered, shrinking closer into her seat.

'Non-sense!' Uncle Hector boomed. He leaped from his chair: this time it did cling to his hips for a fraction of a second before dropping back with a protesting sigh. He stood over Mrs Blount.

'Up you get!' She shook her head.

'Anyone would think you'd never shown your legs before.' He stared down at her. She looked at him with a half-frightened, half-incredulous expression. 'Hector,' she whispered, 'how *could* you?'

'Come on! Come on!' the other women chorused. Uncle Hector's hand shot out and clasped Mrs Blount by the wrist: he ruggel, almost jerking her to her feet. She let out a cry. 'Hector! You're hurting me!' Alan's mother and Aunt Glad stopped laughing. They gaped at the pair: Mrs Blount struggling in her chair; Uncle Hector standing over her, his face a mulberry colour, his teeth glistening.

There was a scraping noise on the worn linoleum as the door of the middle room was pushed open. Alan's grandmother entered the room. She was wearing her 'autumn coat', which she persisted with, whatever the weather, until exactly the middle of October. It was made of some stiff black material with a silky sheen, and tied at the throat with black bands backed with purple: the wide cuffs were also lined with purple.

It was a relic of Winthrop Avenue, and it made her look both more dignified and more frail. Its cut emphasised her round shoulders, making her look almost hump-backed. Her black hat tilted forward because of the tightly braided silver bun: a large pin with a black head was pushed through hat and bun. She was holding her gloves and a large black handbag in one hand and in the other a long umbrella topped by the handle of Amara silver. She pressed them close to her stomach and compressed her lips. Uncle Hector straightened himself. His nostrils had grown wider: the hairs inside stirred as he breathed. But he faced his mother-in-law, his arms dangling at his side, a hang-dog expression on his face.

'Well! This is a pretty sight,' she said grimly.

'Just a bit of fun . . .' he muttered.

'Oh, I've no doubt! Just a bit of fun. As soon as my back's turned to go to see poor Cora . . . In front of the children, too!' Alan's mother and Aunt Glad, affecting to be aware of their presence for the first time, summoned them from their corner with exclamations of dismay. Uncle Hector scowled at them. He threw himself into his basket chair, which sagged like a concertina, and took out another cigar. He bit off the end, spat it into the fireplace, and retired behind a haze of blue smoke. Mrs Blount got to her feet and slipped out of the room. Meg went up to her grandmother.

'We've want a story. A *nice* story,' she said.

'Come along, then: the sooner I take you out of *this* room the better.' She glanced contemptuously at the two women and glared in her son-in-law's direction. He puffed rapidly: the blue smoke-screen thickened. She turned on her heel and swept out. Alan and Meg followed. For once they were glad to be leaving the middle room. As they closed the door they heard Uncle Hector give a short laugh. 'Well, I've still got the sixpence!' he said.

CHAPTER TEN

It was one of those desultory days in autumn. One moment everything was still and the branches of the trees floated against the sky as peacefully as at the height of summer and the blue was made deeper by the filigree of twigs. The next, everything was in motion again: the branches rattled and creaked like the interlocking horns of steers, and bits of dead wood and the last of the leaves – mottled green, yellow and red with black edges – were tossed to and fro and the sky turned a livid, steely colour. The atmosphere affected the whole neighbourhood. Up and down Majuba Road hands were slamming doors and windows in irritable competition with the wind. The chopping of wood, filling of coal-scuttles, and handling of crockery made more din than usual. Even the water from the taps gushed more noisily. The children who had ventured into the road played in spasms with a great deal of shouting and quarrelling and Greg was for ever pushing open his bedroom window so that it banged against the wall, playing a few excruciating notes on his bugle and retiring as abruptly as he had emerged.

Inside, the house was disordered and comfortless. The women bustled, but made no progress: tables were thrust into corners, and chairs piled on top of them: pails, bowls of water, mops and dusters were scattered about and forgotten. The confusion was made worse by the fact that the younger women were on bad terms – not bad enough for Alan's mother to resort to her more extreme guerrilla tactics, but sufficiently serious to rule out co-operation.

Aunt Glad pretended to treat the incident of the sixpence as a joke, but she was jealous of her sister-in-law's triumph.

She for her part was inclined to give herself airs. Both felt uneasy when they remembered Mrs Blount, and although they scoffed at their husbands' 'stuffiness' they were secretly disturbed by it.

'Ernie actually had the cheek to tell me off,' Aunt Glad confided. 'He was actually *jealous*. I gave him a piece of my mind, I can tell you!'

'We heard you,' Alan's mother replied. Aunt Glad darted a glance at her.

'Well, what did our Arthur say to you?'

'He didn't think it was nice. I agreed with him, of course.'

'Hark who's talking!'

'I *didn't* think it was nice . . . afterwards . . . in front of Mrs Blount, too!'

'I noticed *you* whipped up your skirts fast enough!'

'Gladys! How *dare* you?'

'Well, you did, didn't you?'

'I was not the one who started it.'

'So it was all my fault, was it?'

'Somebody must have egged him on . . .'

At this the two women had snatched up their respective belongings and marched off to their own rooms. Uncle Hector himself had attempted to restore the peace, but like two quarrelsome footballers who push the referee aside, the women ignored his efforts and concentrated on each other's moves. Alternatively they used his presence as a cause for further recriminations, accusing each other of currying favour. He adapted himself to the situation, esconcing himself in middle room or front room according to where food and creature comforts were available.

Alan hated this time of the year with its jangle and confusion: even the fact that it was a Saturday morning and there was no school brought little comfort. He would be glad when winter came. Then frost and mist would restore to the garden

something of its former mystery. There would be the days of pale sunshine when, wrapped in winter clothing, they could sit in the den and no one would dream of looking for them there. Today the wind whistled through the branches, roughening their knees and tossing icy drops in their faces. Soon they had to scramble out again, their teeth chattering. They went on to the paved yard. Alan made Meg stand against the door of the coal-shed while he measured her. When she moved away he saw that he had chalked over the previous mark. In all these weeks she had not gained a fraction of an inch, whereas he had an almost continuous sensation of stretching between trousers and boot-tops. He had assumed that all living things grew at a uniform rate, that spurt was matched with spurt: it was monstrous to discover that one creature might shoot upwards while another stayed still. It was as if he and Meg were on the roundabout at Denton Fair – she quite rightly on a smaller horse, but dipping up and down on the same circuit – and suddenly his mount had soared up and out on an entirely different track. It was not only a matter of physical growth. Recently he had found that he had acquired words and ideas which were gibberish to her. There were, too, the whispered colloquies between the grown-ups, accompanied by nudges and glances which were particularly distasteful, to the effect that he was ‘springing up’ and that ‘other sleeping arrangements’ would have to be devised. He threw the piece of chalk down and scowled at Meg. It seemed to him that it must be her fault: at the same time he was filled with a sense of betrayal. He turned to the thought of Uncle Hector biding his time in his bedroom until the downstairs rooms were restored to some semblance of comfort, wrapped in the red dressing-gown; he was a dynamo that beat steadfastly through the autumnal confusions and complexities.

Aunt Glad arrived to take Meg to the dentist. She informed him that his mother was out shopping. She spoke in curt tones

but patted his head to reassure him that he was not involved in the quarrel. Alan guessed that his mother had slipped out first in order to avoid walking along the road with Aunt Glad.

When they had gone he wandered disconsolately round the garden and then returned to the house. When he pushed open the door of the front room he saw his grandmother and Uncle Hector. Every detail of the scene immediately printed itself on his imagination. He was aware not only of the composition of the room, the position of every article of furniture and the relation of the two figures to them, of every tone and shade of colour, of the sounds of clock and fire and breathing and the buzzing of a late fly, and the rattling of wheels and the sounds of voices outside and, beyond, the tolling of a church bell, but also of the smells of bodies and materials and of the atmosphere itself, compounded in its turn of the smells of meals that had been cooked and eaten and of people who had passed in and out, some of them never to return. He was also aware of the faces of the two human beings before him as mirrors that reflected both the thoughts and emotions of the moment and a thousand ruminations upon the past and a thousand speculations upon the future. For the first time he sensed the juxtaposition of that which belonged to the momentary surface and that which was contained within it like a fruit beneath its skin.

Uncle Hector was still wearing his dressing-gown. It took on an additional fire from the colours of his face and hair. But the weight of silk which had caused it to slide from its coat-hanger created a problem even for his broad shoulders. It was only by a continuous bulging of muscle, Alan felt, that Uncle Hector kept it in position. Its natural momentum drove it to subside in coils on the floor as if animated by the dragon which patterned it. As it was, the sash refused to stay knotted so that the dressing-gown gaped open. The pyjamas beneath also gaped. At first Alan saw only an indeterminate blur. As his mind focused he took in a tangle of reddish-brown hair. It

started at the hollow of Uncle Hector's throat, curled like volleys of smoke beneath the half-open pyjama jacket, puffing through the button-holes and out of the cuffs and trouser ends. His mind shcered away from the denser thicket that spread from the navel downwards. It horrified and fascinated him. At the same moment he caught a sidelong glance from his grandmother. She, too, was struggling to keep her eyes away.

She spoke in a soft husky voice he had not heard before. 'I'm ashamed of you, my boy.'

'What have I done now, Mam?' He spoke mildly.

'Slopping about in that dressing-gown for one thing. . . .' This time she could not stop a rapid lowering of her eyes. Uncle Hector unhurriedly pulled the dressing-gown round him. He continued to sprawl.

'What of it? I'm on demob leave. . . .

'Wasting your time, *I* should call it! Hanging about the house half the day – and round the women's skirts when you get the chance. . . .'

'What do you expect me to do, Mam?'

'Well . . . *this* isn't what I expected. I thought . . . I thought it would be like old times. . . . Do you remember how you and me and poor Cora used to have tea together in Laidlaw's? And those walks up to the cross-roads? And the long talks we used to have?'

'We always got on well together, Mam. . . .'

'You know Cora thought the *world* of you!'

'I know, Mam, but . . .'

'Don't say it! I know . . . I know. . . . But I thought it would be just the same. . . . You and me – and poor Cora's memory. . . . It's weeks since you went to the cemetery, isn't it? Isn't it?'

'I've told you before – I don't like cemeteries.'

'*I thought* you'd gone last Thursday. When you left just after breakfast, I said to myself: "He's gone to see poor Cora!" . . .

And the week before that you were out all day – on the Wednesday.'

'You don't want to keep me bottled up here all the time, do you, Mother? You were saying just now that I was always slopping about . . .'

'Yes, but you don't have to go gadding all over the place.'

'Really, Mother, I don't know *what* you want. I shall have to go soon, anyway – do give me a bit of peace in the meantime.'

'Oh, ~~there's~~ there's no hurry about *going*. You fellows deserve a rest . . . don't you think about going! Plenty of time for that, plenty of time . . .'

'I shall have to look for a ship . . .'

'Well, wait till your demob comes through. But you know, my boy . . . shall I tell you something?'

'What is it?'

'The old place in Winthrop Avenue's to let!'

'You don't say! Must go and have a look at it one of these days. . . .'

'Ah! Have *you* got the same idea?'

'Just a minute! I said nothing about having "ideas".'

'But don't you think . . .'

'Don't I think what?'

'That it would be nice to take the house in Winthrop Avenue again.'

'What on earth for?'

'For your *home*!'

'But . . . but . . .'

'I would keep house for you. A sailor needs a decent home to come back to . . . keeps him out of mischief. . . . I'll look after you when you're home, my boy – you trust me. Why, it *will* be like old times! Just you and me and . . .'

'I don't like Cranwyck, Mother.'

'Oh, you'd soon change your mind when you'd have a few of my rabbit-pies! Remember how you used to like them?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'You think it over, my boy . . . I wish you wouldn't call me "Mother". It doesn't seem right . . .'

'Sorry, Mam.'

'Hector! Go and get dressed!' She had noticed Alan. Uncle Hector heaved himself out of the chair. When he passed Alan there was a smell of perspiration and leather.

During lunch Alan sat with his ear close to the wall so that he could hear what was happening in the middle room. Molly had arrived home unexpectedly.

'What are you doing here, young lady?' Aunt Glad greeted her.

'I felt sick, Mother.' Molly spoke in an odd strained voice. 'Mr Momson sent me home. . . '

'What's the matter with you, dear?' Aunt Glad's sympathy sounded perfunctory

'It's nothing, really, Mum.'

'Don't be silly! It must be *something* if you've come home at dinner-time – on a Saturday.'

'It's nothing.'

'Is it something you've eaten in the canteen?'

'I told you, Mum, it's nothing. Don't fuss!'

'If it's "nothing" you'll soon lose that job – coming home on a Saturday – of *all* days.'

'Don't nag, Mum!' Molly's voice sounded guttural as if somebody was pressing on her throat.

'Well, get on with your dinner.'

'I don't want any dinner. I don't feel hungry, Mum. Honest, I don't!'

'Well!'

There was a muffled noise as Molly began to cry. It was followed by the scraping of a chair as Aunt Glad hastened to her side. 'There! There!' she murmured. Meg's voice now rose in a wail: 'Can't eat the meat!'

'What's the matter with you?'

'Tooth hurts!'

'But the dentist took it out.'

'The place hurts.'

'Then eat the other side.'

'It's not comfy the other side,' Meg wailed more loudly. There was a vigorous scraping of knife and fork against plate. 'Look, I've cut it up for you.' Aunt Glad said. 'Eat it. Eat every scrap!'

'Don't want it. Nasty meat!' There was a clatter as Aunt Glad hurled down the knife and fork.

'What a *bloody* day!' she said. Molly and Meg wailed in unison.

The scuds of rain had stopped: the sun hung precariously, like a balloon that might at any moment be snatched away. Alan picked up the bar of chocolate that lay in his path. Mr Cowcher had resumed his old habits. He had even returned to the use of dustpan and brush: he was standing at the edge of his lawn, waiting to pounce. It was too windy to light a bonfire, and he carried each leaf to the dustbin. He pretended not to notice Alan.

Alan crawled inside the den. The wind whistled contemptuously through it. On the branches above him, where buds had failed to come to leaf, there were minute black specks. The thicker branches were also black and dry, but when he leaned against them he felt the old patient resilience. A few dark leaves, as tough as leather, afforded some protection: the surface of the den was made tolerable by an old ground-sheet – another example of Mr Cowcher's anonymous largesse.

The dead twigs were hard like pebbles beneath the ground-sheet. In the places where this had perished and he and Meg had picked off the bits of rubber, orange-coloured water had collected. When he tried to pour it off, a rivulet shot down his trouser leg: he mopped it up with his handkerchief. To his irritation he found that he had to hunch his shoulders to pre-

vent his head sticking through the top of the hedge. He remembered the scene in the middle room that morning. He imagined Uncle Hector might come into the garden and snatch him from the den, scornfully destroying its last pretences. He flinched away from the idea. He was grateful when Meg crept in beside him. The side of her face was swollen: she sniffed to remind him of her recent ordeal. She scrutinised him with an enigmatic expression, and then leaned against him. The action seemed to say that she had taken note of his mood and of the changes taking place inside him, but turned to him, nevertheless, with absolute confidence. He could have wept with gratitude. He wanted to do something to express it. Meg studied his face again. 'Alan,' she said, 'I'se hungry.' He scrambled out of the den.

He remembered the gooseberry bush that grew among the tangle of vegetation at the bottom of the garden close to the elderberry tree. It had once more yielded a heavy crop: but Alan knew that a few berries would have escaped. The lower branches were hidden by strands of straw-coloured couch grass. He thrust them aside. A few clover-shaped leaves, brown and brittle like bits of copper, still clung to the branches: the wood was black and soft: the thorns which had once drawn blood, snapped off when he touched them. He found six fat berries, suspended like Chinese lanterns. Their tiny green tails were as rotten as rusty wire: the hovering of his hand was enough to cause the berries to fall. They were furry like teasle brushes: the skins were tough with brown and orange patches, but the juice below them moved like water in a blister.

He carried them, cupped in his hand, back to the den. He dropped one of them. It burst on Meg's knee: she scooped up the juice and seeds, then she ate the skin, which lay separate like a miniature deflated balloon. The gooseberries inside their mouths felt like bloated caterpillars: the slightest pressure disgorged them over their tongues.

When they had finished Meg said: 'I'se like that story – you know the one about the giant and the prince.'

'Well, this prince had a white horse,' he began, 'and there was a princess locked up in an attic in the next road – no, in the back streets. . . .'

'Let's not have the giant this time,' Meg interrupted, with a cunning look. Alan hesitated. 'All right,' he said. 'Anyway, there were some very fierce cockerels guarding her. . . .' But a few minutes later a shadow fell across the front of the den. He looked out and saw Molly.

'Hello, you!' she said. She spoke in the rough voice she used to remind him of the difference in their ages. Alan withdrew his head. To his astonishment Molly stooped quickly and crawled in after him.

'Move over!' she said curtly. She had to sit sideways, heels tucked under her and her head lowered. She held her arms close to her side, as if she wanted to compress herself into as small a space as possible. She stared moodily in front of her. They heard the tap-tapping of Mr Cowcher's hoe and his sudden dashes when he caught sight of an incipient weed. They could hear Mr Poole barking commands to his daughters. They did the housework on Saturdays, accompanied by religious harangues delivered in a nasal sing-song. Of late ugly sounds had been coming from Mr Poole's house. The children of Majuba Road spoke in whispers of his army belt. It was festooned with pouches, and blackened with sweat, with a buckle as big as a plate. It stood round his waist like a hoop, protruding over the top of his trousers so that it was difficult to see how it supported them. For this reason perhaps he also wore braces: these, too, were very wide with big buckles and leather tabs. Without his coat Mr Poole looked as if he were encased in harness.

Suddenly Molly began to talk very fast in an affected high-pitched voice.

'Let's play the "alphabet game". I'll start. Well, once upon a time there was a boy named "A" . . . "A" . . . "A" . . . Go on, silly!' She gave Meg a push. 'Don't know,' Meg said. She regarded her sister with a wary expression.

'Oh, you *do*,' Molly replied. 'When I say a letter you've got to find something beginning with it. Go on! "A"—"A"—"A"—*that's* easy enough!'

'Alan!' Meg announced triumphantly.

'That's right! You see how easy it is? All right? Then. This boy named Alan met a girl named "B" . . . "B" . . . "B" . . . ' Meg!

'Oh, you're *stupid*!' Molly cried. '"Meg" doesn't begin with "B". *Don't you see*—it must begin with "B".' Meg's lip trembled.

'It isn't your turn, anyway,' Molly concluded. 'Alan?'

'Betty,' Alan said in a scared voice.

'Good! Well, Betty lived in a town called "C". Come on, Meg! *You* now!' Meg put her thumb in her mouth. 'Cranwyck, of *course*!' Molly almost shouted. 'And one day Alan and Betty went for a ride on a "D"! "D!" "D!"' She nudged Alan, repeating the letter as if she were firing bullets from a gun, 'D! D! D!' Alan's brain refused to work: he looked at her miserably. He wished Molly would go away. Whatever had induced her to enter the den? Molly frowned. She put her face close to his and screamed: 'Donkey! Donkey! And *that's* what you are!'

Another shadow fell across the entrance. Alan looked out and saw Victor. He was too relieved to feel disappointed that it was not Uncle Hector. The hand that clasped his was warm and moist: it was bigger than he remembered. Victor had broadened in the last few months. His hair was more disciplined and he used less brilliantine: his ears grew closer to his head. His voice was deeper and he didn't smile as much. 'I'm looking for Molly,' he said. Alan pointed towards the hedge. Victor bent down and pretended to discover her. 'So *that's* where you've got to,' he

said. 'Come on! They're organising an "expedition".' This was the word used at Number Twenty Majuba Road to describe any unusual outing. Molly scrambled out of the den on all fours and allowed Victor to pull her to her feet. Her stockings were awry, mud clung to the sides of her shoes.

'Don't want to go on an expedition,' she said in a voice like her sister's.

'I've told them you're coming, honey,' Victor said soothingly. They exchanged glances. There was something in the expressions that baffled Alan: then unaccountably Molly burst into tears and flung herself into Victor's arms. He held her awkwardly: he remembered that he was still wearing his cap: with one hand he snatched it off and thrust it in his pocket.

In the middle room Aunt Glad was cramming bits of mending into the drawers of the sewing-machine. Upstairs others drawers were being opened and shut. Alan knew that his mother was searching for her best lavender suede gloves which she kept in tissue paper and so thoroughly hidden – in order to put them out of temptation's way – that she always had difficulty in finding them again.

Alan's grandmother, as usual, was ready first. She stood in the passage smoothing out the wrinkles in her own best gloves. She wore her black coat with the purple facings and a silk scarf fastened with the gold brooch. But what set this aside as a special occasion was the fact that she was wearing her veil. Even Alan's mother admitted that this made her look 'a real lady'. It gave her face a withdrawn, mysterious look. There were black freckles round her chin where the thicker part of the pattern came, as if she were peering through sunlit leaves.

Uncle Hector stood in the middle room, shouting encouragement to different parts of the house like a ring-master cracking his whip. He had cleaned his black brogues himself. He kept his wardrobe in tip-top condition and scorned offers of help.

'We sailors are used to keeping our tackle in trim,' he would say. It was done so unobtrusively that Alan's mother liked to imagine that he had employed a batman. He was wearing a trench coat with several capes, pockets at unexpected angles, and numerous buckles and tabs, encased, like the buttons, in leather. On his hands were pigskin gloves with heavy stitching at the backs: they were undone at the wrists so that the hair strayed over the studs. He was carrying a trilby hat of raffish design. He was using his Irish voice. The trench coat and trilby made him feel like a Sinn Féiner – though in fact his relations in Ireland were Protestants and he had many thrilling tales of how he had dodged spies and assassins on his last visit.

'Is it all night you're going to be?' he cried, banging his stick on the floor. 'Aren't I after telling ye that ye'll miss the pretty moving pictures?' And then, tiring of the performance and in a crosser voice: 'Ah, get a move on, can't you? The picture starts in half an hour!'

At the words 'moving pictures' Alan and Meg danced up and down in excitement and anxiety. They had never been to the pictures; it was not considered 'respectable' to take children. But they had listened spellbound to their friends' accounts. At first they had imagined 'the pictures' to be like the ones at the Municipal gallery to which their grandmother had once taken them – but with frames of plush and velvet and gold, bathed perhaps in multi-coloured floodlights. Then one day Greg had overheard them discussing their parents' latest visit to the 'pictures'. 'Yah, they're *moving* pictures!' he had exclaimed. The addition of the adjective merely animated their picture gallery. In their mind's eye they saw a contraption of wires and pulleys that carried the canvases one after the other before the admiring gaze of the audience. Or even a file of men in shirt-sleeves, cloth caps and green-baize aprons running across the stage and holding them triumphantly aloft.

When Alan's mother and Aunt Glad arrived, smelling of

camphor and lavender, they looked at the children and then eyed each other uncertainly. Uncle Hector's 'expedition' had brought hostilities to an end, but each suspected that the other might still be on the look-out for an unfair advantage. Here was an issue that might provide it.

'It won't hurt them . . .' Alan's father ventured.

'Of course it won't!' Uncle Ernest burst out. 'They're *quite* old enough.'

This challenge to their rights as the true arbiters of the children's destinies had the effect of uniting the women in indignation.

'Just like you!' Aunt Glad snapped at her husband. 'Good job I've got the children's welfare at heart.'

'I must say I'm surprised at *you*, Arthur,' his wife said in her sad, resigned voice. Her sister-in-law shot a glance at her, speculating whether this remark implied criticism of her own husband. She frequently held up her brother as a model of refinement and charm: it was a different matter if anybody else made invidious comparisons. Meg let out a piercing wail: Alan matched it with a bellow.

'There! There!' their mothers exclaimed in sugary tones. 'There! There! You don't *really* want to go to the stuffy old pictures, do you? They're bad for your eyes – but of course *they* wouldn't think of that! You'd *much* rather have *another* treat, wouldn't you? We'll bring you supper in bed. What about that? And something special with it!'

'We've want the *pictures*!' Meg yelled, her face and knees turning scarlet. She stamped first one foot, then the other.

'The *moving* pictures!' Alan added in a loud accusing voice.

Uncle Hector marched into the passage and banged his stick. 'Damn it!' he roared and the hubbub subsided. 'If you take them their suppers in bed we'll *never* get started. *Of course* they can come!'

His mother-in-law came to his support. 'I've never heard such

nonsense! They're not babies.' She nodded her veiled head approvingly in Uncle Hector's direction.

'Right! Then that's settled,' he said. 'Come on now.'

Alan flung himself on his uncle: even Meg caught hold of his hand, dancing up and down shouting: 'We're going to the pictures! We're going to the pictures! We're going to watch them *moving*!' Uncle Hector looked in alarm over the tops of their heads. His mother-in-law extricated him. He led the way out of the house.

On the way to the Palace Cinema, two men passed them: the younger glared at Uncle Ernest, the older made as if to speak and then turned his head.

'Ern! Those men gave you a *look*,' Aunt Glad said. Uncle Ernest's face had turned red. 'Who were they, Ern?'

'I *think*,' Alan's mother said, 'that the *gentlemanly* one was Captain Coram.'

'Oh! . . . Who was that with him?'

'Farmer Bledisloe,' Uncle Ernest muttered.

'Oh dear!'

'Thick as thieves, weren't they?' Alan's mother said.

Alan and Meg had often admired the mustachioed commissioner with his peaked cap and long coat with sky-blue facings. This was the first time they had seen the usherettes in their orange and green blouses and pill-box hats, or the manager in his evening-dress. This magnificent creature came over and spoke to Uncle Hector, addressing him respectfully as 'Captain' and escorted them to their seats in person.

A screen faced them covered with advertisements: there were pictures of a bicycle, a perambulator, a sewing-machine and various other articles.

'They don't *move*!' Meg exclaimed in disgust. She turned her attention to her seat, pulling it down and letting it return to an upright position with a bang. Uncle Hector frowned.

'After all, we *are* in the best seats,' Alan's mother observed.

Aunt Glad took hold of Meg and dumped her down. She placed her too far back and the seat tilted: Meg's plump legs stuck out as if she had been caught in a mincing-machine. Several people near-by tittered. Uncle Hector rose to his feet and stalked out: the whole row swayed to let him pass, the seats swinging back like the rattle of musketry. The women looked at each other in consternation. Was Uncle Hector ashamed of them? Aunt Glad rearranged Meg, pushing her husband's raincoat at her back. They sighed with relief when Uncle Hector reappeared carrying 'Dorothy bags' of chocolates.

An elderly lady with horn-rimmed spectacles and a black fringe appeared at the side of the screen and began to attack a piano. Alan joined in the applause enthusiastically. He had to admit to a slight feeling of disappointment. It struck him as odd that so many people should congregate in order to gaze at a screen which only moved when the lady with the fringe struck the piano with exceptional vigour. On the other hand the velvet hangings were more opulent than he had dared imagine: the pillars were tessellated with multi-coloured fragments and surmounted by scrolls of gold: the plush seats caressed the backs of his legs: the atmosphere smelt of tobacco, perspiration and an exotic perfume which the usherettes squirted into the air. There was the murmur of voices, the creaking of seats, the rustling of chocolate boxes and toffee papers. He felt that he was witnessing some mysterious ritual of the adult world. When the lights faded he thought it was the signal for departure and stood up. Uncle Hector thrust him back. The lady with the fringe flung herself at the piano. The advertisement disappeared. There was a whirring noise somewhere behind them and a mote-flecked beam of light, like dusty milk, cut athwart the darkened cinema. Alan and Meg gasped in terror and delight.

The film was not so very different from their original conception. It was a documentary about the Battle of Jutland.

Much of it consisted of still photographs of officers and crews and of diagrams and charts. But in between there were news-reel extracts and these undoubtedly and gloriously *moved*. Uncle Hector kept up a running commentary in a loud whisper, using many technical terms and drawing attention to details which only a seaman could be expected to observe. Some of the people in the row behind hissed 'Shh!' Alan's mother turned round and fixing them with her haughtiest expression exclaimed: 'He's a sea captain — *and* an officer!' The objectors were silenced: they too now leaned forward listening intently to Uncle Hector. Word went round that he was a gallant survivor of the battle: he appeared to believe it himself, Alan and Meg were convinced that the film was actually being controlled by Uncle Hector, that his friend the manager had handed it over to him.

When they came out of the cinema they took the road that led to the Municipal Park. A large crowd was proceeding in the same direction with a purposeful air. Alan was reminded of the crowds that streamed along Majuba Road towards the football ground. He and Meg often watched from the front window. Often they saw people they knew but there was no sign of recognition. The figures that passed before their eyes were bundles of blind energy completely removed from everyday concerns. Nothing, Alan believed, could have stopped that forward-moving stream. Even his mother, even Aunt Glad was powerless against it. When once his father and Uncle Ernest had announced their intention of going to 'the match' they became different beings. The womenfolk stood aside with respectful almost awestruck expressions as they marched out of the house. And when a little later roar after roar came across the roof-tops, those left behind would pause and look about them apprehensively, while Alan and Meg would feel an inexplicable sinking of their stomachs at the thought of their fathers' voices lost in that mindless thunder. During high tea

they would go on discussing the match, ignoring the women, who kept an unwonted silence. It was only after the passage of several hours that they could take their revenge. Alan's mother would announce that she had a headache and retire early to bed, and it was on these evenings that Aunt Glad was most liable to use her darning-needle.

It was not until they were approaching the gates of the park that anyone thought of explaining to Alan and Meg that the reason for the expedition was that it was 'Armistice Day'. Alan could remember when the mysterious word 'armistice' had been on everybody's lips, when the hooters had sounded and the church bells had rung and his mother had covered her head in her apron. He looked apprehensively at his father. 'Is there *another* war?' he asked.

'It's in *memory* of the war, silly!' Molly said.

'We've come to see the tank,' Uncle Hector explained.

Alan and Meg had seen pictures of tanks in illustrated magazines. These showed huge iron monsters spouting jets of fire and crushing the living and the dead beneath them. Meg came to an abrupt stop. She looked indignantly about her. 'Shouldn't we run?' she asked.

Uncle Hector laughed scornfully. 'It's one of *ours*,' he said. 'It's being presented to the city.' His voice dropped reverently. 'In memory of our gallant fellows!'

There was a tremendous crush inside the park. Uncle Hector took hold of Alan and Meg by the hands; he thrust out his chest like a battering ram and cleared a passage nearly to the front of the crowd. There was a railed enclosure and in the middle of it a stone plinth with a ramp. To the right of the plinth was a wooden platform on which were seated the Mayor and Corporation in their chains of office. The enclosure was lit by strings of red, white and blue electric bulbs. These threw a bright light on to the foremost ranks of the crowd and a fainter illumination beyond where dark shapes bobbed up and down,

sometimes visible, sometimes lost in shadow, like night swimmers tossed on the waves. On either side was a row of giant elms: their lower leaves caught the light as if burning oil had been poured over them: their depths showed black: every now and then they shook themselves: their murmuring could be heard above the noise of the crowd.

Behind the enclosure there was a concrete path: this led to the Memorial Gates which were to be opened for the first time for the passage of the tank. There was a roar of 'Here she comes!' followed by a rumbling and clattering as if a hundred cooking stoves were being dragged along. But Alan could see nothing but trouser-legs and skirts and small patches of grass in between, which, like the trees, waved to the night breeze in weird independence of the human beings who had intruded upon them. It was now that the 'expedition' reached its climax as far as Alan was concerned. Uncle Ernest had already seated Meg on his shoulders and Alan's father was just bending down when Uncle Hector caught hold of him and swung him aloft. He found himself seated against the back of the broad neck, a leg on either side: the bristles on Uncle Hector's cheeks scratched his thighs.

The tank negotiated the gateway and lumbered along the concrete path. At the foot of the ramp it paused. With its turrets and slit-windows it looked like a section of Cranwyck jail that had detached itself and crawled away. At the ramp it stuck and had to back down. Then with a sudden lurch it reached the top of the plinth. It settled on its haunches like a prehistoric animal expiring. There was a cheer from the crowd as the turret opened and the crew climbed out. The Mayor made a speech. Nobody could hear a word, but whenever he looked appealingly in their direction and flashed his teeth everybody laughed. Other dignitaries rose to their feet mouth-ing soundlessly like goldfish in a bowl. When the speeches were over a fireworks display began on a plot of ground near-

by. Roman candles gushed, golden-rain rose and fell, etched against the darkness like fiery weeping willows. Globes of stars of red, blue and green opened like desert flowers in the sun, blazed and faded. Squibs spat and squirted; catherine-wheels whizzed round like serrated fried eggs; Chinese crackers jumped and barked like Pekinese and the whole was punctuated by the booming of the 'cannons'. In the sky overhead, rockets soared and faltered, and then, like skeleton hands, spread out fingers and knuckles of fire. It was like a forest fire in reverse: the clearing blazed but the surrounding forest was dark and brooding: the spectators under the trees were like forest animals watching from a safe distance, except when their lifted faces showed white under the light of the rockets. The tank squatted on its plinth, as if it had already sunk into the dimension of timeless memorials.

Guy Fawkes' Night at Number Twenty Majuba Road had been a tame affair, with nothing more than a few sparklers and luminous matches: neither Uncle Ernest nor Alan's father could master the art of lighting bonfires: Uncle Hector had been away. Now the excitement was almost unbearable. Alan turned pale; Meg made mincing movements with her mouth, her eyes shone as if they were small fireworks. Alan knew she would be sick before the day was over.

When Uncle Ernest and Uncle Hector carried them back through the park the figures around them swayed in motion with the swaying of the trees – the masses of foliage were leaning this way and that like giants rocking themselves to sleep. The faces beneath them were blurred and shapeless like paper bags bobbing in a stream. But as they were leaving the main gates two of these faces rose upwards as in a nightmare: suddenly Alan recognised Great-uncle Edward and his wife. They were regarding them intently, laughing silently, showing their gums and teeth. Great-aunt Gwen was wearing the mackintosh cloak: its original fawn had turned a chalky white. She sported

a bedraggled boa round her neck: on top of her bun was a circular red hat, like a sirloin of beef. As usual she was carrying a newspaper parcel. Great-uncle Edward wore an ancient black coat with a moth-eaten velvet collar and battered bowler, bottle-green with age and several sizes too large. The skinny nape of his neck was covered with a dusty-looking down: if you rubbed at it, Alan thought, it would come off as easily as the nap from his bowler.

Uncle Hector stopped, his feet planted truculently apart. He put a hand on each of Alan's knees as if prepared to hurl him at them. His mother-in-law pulled at his arm: the other pretended not to notice. But the newcomers advanced with every appearance of affability.

'Watching the fireworks, eh?' Great-aunt Gwen said, addressing the children in order to give the grown-ups time to decide whether they were on speaking terms or not.

'*They* must have cost a pretty penny,' her husband added. 'A disgrace I calls it, wastin' the ratepayers' money!'

Alan's father gave his nervous laugh and, fearing he might have gone too far, glanced quickly at his wife. 'We'se been to the pictures – the *moving* pictures,' Meg announced.

'Well, we must be getting along now,' Alan's grandmother said.

'No 'urry, is there?' her sister replied: she caught her husband's eye and showed her yellow teeth in a grin.

'P'raps we could take you 'ome in the cart?' Great-uncle Edward said ingratiatingly. 'I expect you'll 'ave a few crusts for the 'orse, in return like. . . .' The others shook their heads and hurried off, Uncle Hector reluctantly bringing up the rear.

'Ope you've got that writin'-case safe and sound!' Great-aunt Gwen called after them. Alan looked back and saw them nodding their heads and shaking with silent laughter.

'What were *they* grinning about?' Uncle Hector growled. Uncle Ernest looked worried.

Aunt Glad kept glancing into his face. 'What have they got up their sleeves?' she asked. He shook his head.

'One thing's certain,' his mother-in-law said. 'When Gwen and Edward are in a good humour it means that *somebody* is in trouble.'

The day ended in the desultory fashion in which it had begun. Everybody was uneasy after the encounter with Great-aunt Gwen and her husband. Even Uncle Hector seemed disconcerted. He dumped Alan on the floor as soon as they entered the house. He and Meg were sent to bed with the most perfunctory of good nights. Molly insisted on climbing into their bed. She sat between them, chattering in a shrill monotonous voice about the evening's events, shaking them and hissing in their ears: 'Good - wasn't it good?' or 'Don't you think so? Go on, say you do!' It was only when premonitory rumbling noises came from Meg that she leaped out of bed dragging her sister after her to be sick in the wash-basin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Everything happened so quickly in the next few months, like railings flashing past a carriage window, that Alan felt dazed. The contrast between the obstinate hesitancy of Meg's growth and his own giddy stretching was bad enough – it was nothing to this ugly accumulation. Was this a trick that life played on everybody? Perhaps unpleasant happenings always crowded together like the sediment in a bottle. Perhaps he had drunk his share of the clear liquid. Or was it his relationships to events that had changed? He cast his mind back to past crises: the departure of his father to the war; the telegram announcing that he had been wounded; an illness of his mother's; Aunt Cora's death. He could remember the ache in the pit of his stomach. He had been able to smother it like a dog digesting a bone. Now he seemed to have lost the power of withdrawal. He was in the midst of events: he did not understand but he experienced every stab that the others suffered.

He was the first to catch the sound of Great-uncle Edward's cart. Both families were assembled in the middle room. It was unusually quiet because Uncle Hector was reading the evening paper. It was handed to him as soon as it arrived. He liked to read it in company so that he could make comments as he went along. The women were darning socks. Uncle Ernest was polishing his gaiters – looking in Uncle Hector's direction every now and then in case he was making too much noise. Alan's father was stroking Nipper, who leaned against his legs as if petrified. Meg caught at Alan's sleeve when he started to crawl out of their corner by the bamboo table. He shook her off.

'There's visitors,' he announced. The women put down their

mending. 'It's Great-aunt Gwen and Great-uncle Edward!' he added.

Uncle Hector crackled his newspaper. 'Nonsense!' he snapped. There was a rat-ta-tat at the front door. Nipper let out an indignant 'prim!' and darted away, his tail bent in the middle.

'I believe the boy's right!' Uncle Ernest exclaimed. They sat staring at him. He himself went to the front door.

'Are you all 'ere?' Great-aunt Gwen greeted him.

'Molly and Victor's out,' he said.

'Very likely! *Very* likely!'

The horse and cart were drawn up against the kerb. The horse's skinny flanks were covered with a piece of sacking. Alan heard the scraping of a shovel. Great-uncle Edward was some yards back along the road. He owned an allotment and he had no intention of bequeathing any part of his belongings to Majuba Road.

He replaced the bucket and shovel in the cart and joined his wife. 'Well, let's 'ope that we're welcome,' he said. They exchanged grins. Alan's heart sank.

Alan's grandmother came into the passage. 'Good evening, Gwen, good evening, Edward - this *is* an honour. I hope you are well?'

'Me back's bad,' her sister whined. 'But *we've* nothin' to complain of,' she added, recovering her affability, 'ave we, Edward?'

'I suppose you'd better come in. . . .'

'Thankee, I'm sure.' They advanced down the passage. Alan's grandmother did not have time to prepare the occupants of the middle room by as much as a lift of the eyebrows. They stared at the newcomers. Even Uncle Hector lowered his newspaper. Alan did not return to his place beside Meg. He stood watching, a few feet in front of the bamboo table.

'Well, ain't we goin' to be asked to sit?' Great-aunt Gwen snapped. Alan's father jumped to his feet and pushed forward

two chairs. The visitors lowered themselves gingerly as if suspecting that the legs might have been sawn through. There was silence for several minutes. Great-uncle Edward was grinning: the creases in his cheeks were sprinkled with grime and white stubble. Great-aunt Gwen was no longer smiling. She kept jerking her head and darting glances from under the brim of her hat as if a wasp was stinging her.

Aunt Glad found this unerving: she threw down her needle. 'Well, out with it. If I know you, Aunt Gwen, you don't call on us unless you want something!'

'W'y, you don't mean to say you're goin' to 'elp yer pore relations, do you?' her aunt replied. She nudged her husband: 'They'll be offering us money next!' He gave a bark of laughter.

'Oh no, we just thought we'd drop in like,' Great-aunt Gwen continued in her mildest tones. 'Yes, me an' Edward was just passin' an' we thought we'd say 'ello.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Alan's father said. His sister reluctantly reached out for the teapot.

'Oh, don't you go lavishin' yer 'orspitality on us, me dear,' her aunt cried, laying her hand on her arm with every appearance of solicitude. 'You'll be wantin' every penny afore long!'

'What do you mean?' Aunt Glad said. Uncle Ernest bent over the leggings and began rubbing them with the cloth.

'Aven't you 'eard?' Great-aunt Gwen shook her head dolefully. 'It's 'is pore old dad.' She jerked her thumb at Uncle Ernest.

'The Guv'nor's in Queer Street!' her husband broke in. 'Would you believe it? After all 'is wrigglin' 'e can't wriggle no more.'

'What's all this, Ernie?' Aunt Glad turned to her husband. 'Is she telling the truth?'

'Lor bless you!' her aunt cried. 'Of course I'm tellin' the truth. This ain't no jokin' matter. After all, wot can you expect?'

The old man's credit ain't nothin' to write 'ome about. Not since Captain Coram . . .'

'What about Captain Coram?' Aunt Glad asked, a quiver in her voice.

'W'y, ain't e told you?'

Aunt Glad darted a furious glance at her husband.

'Ain't e told you about Captain Coram and Farmer Bledisloe?'

'We saw 'em outside the Palace,' Uncle Ernest muttered.

'Oh yes, thick as thieves, them two. Old George Bledisloe's told 'im all about that 'orse of yours. Now *wot* was the name of that 'orse?'

'Firefly!' Alan's mother exclaimed in an awestruck voice as if she had detected the hand of Providence.

'Firefly it is! All sorts o' tales they bin tellin' about the way you got 'old o' that 'orse, Ernest me boy.' Great-uncle Edward laid his hand on Uncle Ernest's shoulder.

'What about Firefly?' Aunt Glad demanded.

'Oh, I ain't sayin' the tales is *true*,' her aunt replied, 'but they're bound to 'ave their *effect* like. People ain't so keen on lendin' money when tales like that get about.'

'Let's 'ope that's *all* there'll be to it,' her husband said. 'Let's 'ope there won't be any *other* action.' Aunt Glad shivered.

'Cold, me girl?' her aunt asked.

Uncle Hector had been eying the newcomers over the top of his newspaper. He sat so still that even the basket chair made no sound. Now he appeared to take heart from the fact that hostilities were not being directed at himself. 'What's the confounded fuss?' he demanded, speaking in his best military style. 'Ernest and his father did no more than acquire a horse in a perfectly legitimate line of business.'

'Business!' Great-uncle Edward exclaimed. 'It ain't good business to go *bankrupt*!'

'Oh, surely it hasn't come to that!' Alan's grandmother cried.

'Now don't you fret yerself,' her sister said. 'It ain't 'appened – yet! You mustn't fret at your age.' Great-aunt Gwen was the senior by several years, but her stringy figure gave her a timeless look: her sister had not been looking well of late.

Great-uncle Edward was deriving a good deal 'of amusement from a contemplation of Uncle Hector, whose face revealed a mixture of indignation and uneasiness.

'What are you grinning at?' he growled. 'I thought you had money in the Town and County yourself!'

'E *did* 'ave,' Great-aunt Gwen replied. 'E took it out. . . . Just after that surprise visit you give us . . .'

'Of course, I might have 'elped the old boy,' Great-uncle Edward waved his hand to indicate the resources at his disposal, 'but it ain't as if we was *real* friends o' the family, in spite of being relations . . .'

'Not after that little call.'

'That *weren't* a friendly visit . . .'

'Not by any manner o' means!'

'Oh well, p'r'aps Captain Coram won't do nothin' about Firefly after all.'

'We must be thankful for small mercies.' Great-aunt Gwen turned her eyes piously towards the ceiling.

Silence descended. Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest sat deep in thought. Alan's mother held her hand at her mouth, aghast at the thought that her prognostications about Firefly might somehow be responsible. Her husband looked at his aunt and uncle as if, out of sheer fright, he might hurl himself upon them, as a rabbit at threshing bolts into the jaws of the dogs.

'Well, must be gettin' along,' Great-aunt Gwen said, picking up her newspaper parcel.

'No rest for the righteous!' sighed Great-uncle Edward. 'Got to get me accounts done. No bankruptcy for me. . . . But then I got no big ideas.'

Alan's father jumped to his feet and opened the door. The

visitors stopped before they reached it. They looked at each other as if exchanging a cue.

'Ain't you forgettin' somethin'?' Great-uncle Edward asked.

'Oh ah, went clean out o' me mind.' They stopped in the doorway, nodding and grinning at each other. The rest of the family looked round them apprehensively. Nobody paid any attention to Alan, who had the uncanny sensation that he had been pushed forward and forced to witness everything while remaining invisible. His heart skipped a beat when the visitors turned in his parents' direction. His father's pale blue eyes protruded. He remembered an incident that Aunt Glad was fond of recalling. When she was a child she had once put on a sheet and pounced upon her brother on the dark landing, and he had flung himself upon her and pummelled her till she was black and blue, while she kept crying out, 'It's me, Arthur! It's me!' Alan was ashamed of that story: he couldn't imagine Uncle Hector behaving in such a way.

But Aunt Glad could stand the suspense no longer. 'Come on! Come on!' she cried. 'We know you've got something else that's nasty up your sleeves!'

'No need for *you* to vex yourself, yet aw'ile, me girl,' her aunt replied. 'Wot we've got to say concerns 'is nibs 'ere.'

Uncle Hector laid down his newspaper.

'Well?' The back of his neck looked as if it had turned raw in the sun.

'A nice lookin' lady, eh?' Great-uncle Edward said softly.

'We wanted to congratulate you, like,' his wife continued. 'She *is* a catch, an' no mistake, that Nurse Crossett . . . It *were* Nurse Crossett, weren't it 'Ector? Oh, we've 'eard a 'ot about 'er!'

There was an explosion from the basket chair as Uncle Hector leaned forward. 'How about a drink all round, Ernest, me bhoy?' he cried. The visitors cackled at this transparent attempt to change the subject.

Alan's grandmother stared from them to her son-in-law. 'What do *you* know about Nurse Crosssett?'

'*Must you?*' Uncle Hector said. Great-aunt Gwen and Great-uncle Edward grinned at him.

'Oh, we've *seen* the lady!'

'It was 'er, weren't it, 'Ector? Over in Cheltenham last Thursday? Walkin' along the Prom, arm-in-arm, nice as can be.'

'We was takin' a load off 'en coops up Cleeve Hill,' Great-uncle Edward explained, aghast at the thought that they might think he had been driving for pleasure.

'You didn't see us, did you 'Ector?' Great-aunt Gwen said.

'I didn't think *you* had seen *me*!'

The door opened and Molly entered. Great-aunt Gwen glanced at her and then turning to her niece whispered, with one of those expressions that appeared to convey so much between adults: 'Puttin' on *weight*, ain't she?'

The effect of this remark astounded Alan. The blood drained from Aunt Glad's face. She clutched at Uncle Ernest's arm, then swung round and shot a wild look at Molly. She shook her head as if she was dashing water from her eyes and darted at the visitors. Uncle Ernest caught her arm. Great-uncle Edward and Great-aunt Gwen had beat a hurried retreat. A moment later they heard Great-uncle Edward's "Gee hup!" followed by the rattle of wheels.

A silence descended upon the middle room. The grown-ups avoided each other's eyes. Uncle Hector retired behind his newspaper. Alan's grandmother looked as if it was only the stiffness of her dress that kept her in the chair. Molly sat upright her lips fluttered with her breathing. Something Great-aunt Gwen and Great-uncle Edward had said had caused these reactions. But which remarks, and why? Alan felt sick from participation in emotions he could not comprehend. He longed to escape. He had only to lower himself a few feet to sink beneath the

choppy water. He could sense Meg's presence behind him. But he felt as if he was nailed to the floor.

Slowly they began to disperse. First of all Molly got up and ran from the room. Her mother and father gazed after her, then they too got up and left. Alan could hear them talking in the kitchen. Next Alan's grandmother stood up and looked in Uncle Hector's direction. He kept the newspaper in front of his face. When she had gone he screwed it up, swore and hurled it to the ground. He too left the room. Alan's parents looked at each other. Their eyes reflected concern and panic-stricken relief that the evening's happenings had not involved them.

What was it all about? Alan asked himself when he was in bed. The winding of the clock, Nipper's miaow as he waited to be let out, the sliding of the bolt, the last footfalls on the stairs and the closing of bedroom doors brought no comfort. The nightly ritual that had healed and restored had suddenly become a meaningless routine. He heard his grandmother turning in her bed, and Uncle Hector's cough. From the other bedrooms came a steady whispering. He sat up and looked over to the corner bed. Molly lay facing the wall. He knew that she too was listening. He wished these mysteries had been resolved there and then in the middle room among an uproar of voice and violent action. The grown-ups *knew* what it was all about – why couldn't they have got it over and done with?

But the next morning everybody behaved as if nothing had happened. Uncle Ernest left for work on his bicycle, his breeches protruding at the usual jaunty angle. Aunt Glad saw Molly off at the gate with no comment beyond a sidelong glance. Uncle Hector in trench coat and trilby hat turned down at the brim, carrying a shooting-stick and a pair of binoculars, strode out of the house and announced that he was going to the Cheltenham races. His mother-in-law said nothing. It seemed to Alan that she had changed overnight. Her body looked heavier, her hands were soft and puffy.

He questioned his mother. 'What's "going bankrupt"?'

'It means being ruined.'

'Why?'

'Because you have to sell everything you possess – well, nearly everything.'

'Will the Guv'nor be ruined?'

'We don't know for certain.'

'Won't he have anything to eat?'

'Of course he will!'

'Then why does "going bankrupt" mean "being ruined"?''

'Because it's a *terrible disgrace*!'

'What has Molly done wrong?' His mother looked alarmed.

'What makes you think she has done something wrong?'

'Aunt Glad is angry with her, isn't she?'

'No! No! There's nothing to be angry about. There *mustn't* be!'

'Then why was Aunt Glad upset when Great-aunt Gwen said Molly was putting on weight? What did she mean?'

'Nothing! Nothing! She didn't mean anything.' She caught hold of his arm. 'You're not to mention what Aunt Gwen said to a *living soul*! Do you understand?'

'Why?'

His mother wrung her hands. 'People would talk!'

Perhaps the crux of the matter lay with Uncle Hector and not with the Guv'nor or Molly? The visits to Cheltenham he gathered were not only 'disgraceful' but 'underhand'. This had something to do with the fact that Uncle Hector had been married to Aunt Cora and that he ought to 'show a proper respect for the dead'.

'Is it Uncle Hector has made Grandma ill?'

'She's not really ill – it's just that she's not herself.'

'Is it Uncle Hector's fault?'

'Well, he hasn't helped.'

'You mean because he sees Nurse Crossett in Cheltenham?'

'Nurse Crossett! What do you know about Nurse Crossett?
. . . Well, she doesn't like it of course. . . .'

'Why not?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'I think it must be Uncle Hector's fault.'

'Oh, she's got bigger worries than that.'

'You mean the Guv'nor "going bankrupt"?''

'That and other things. . . She worries about her family, naturally. . . .'

He sought out his grandmother. She patted his head absent-mindedly. When he took hold of her hand it was limp like cottonwool. To his surprise there were no scenes between her and Uncle Hector. Uncle Hector seemed to share his surprise. He hung about when his mother-in-law was in the room, squared his shoulders and set his jaw as if he wanted to have it out. She paid no attention. He tried to bring matters to a head 'Well, Mam,' he said a few days later, 'I'm off to Cheltenham.' She nodded and smiled. 'I'm going to Cheltenham, Mam - *to see Nurse Crossett!*'

'Yes, my boy,' she replied, as if he were setting out on a picnic. 'Have a good time. Don't be home late.' Uncle Hector backed out of the room staring. He looked as if he might burst into tears.

Alan remembered the scene he had witnessed in the front room. He had been present at something forbidden. Wasn't it logical, therefore, to conclude that he himself was to blame? Suddenly this seemed the key to all these mysteries. And his punishment was to carry about with him the clues without knowing how to join them together. He felt as if he was carrying the whole burden of the family's distress.

He overheard Uncle Ernest and Aunt Glad talking about the Guv'nor. 'There, Glad, old girl,' Uncle Ernest said 'He might pull it off, even now!'

'And what if he doesn't?'

'I shall have to look for a job. Plenty of places would be glad to get a good groom.'

'Not if Captain Coram can help it!'

'Well, we might have to leave Cranwyck.'

'Leave Cranwyck!'

Was this to be a further punishment? Alan rushed into the garden. Meg was sitting in the den, as bedraggled now as an abandoned bird's nest. She had crammed the space which he usually occupied with an assortment of dolls. He watched unseen. He had the feeling that if he did not join Meg now, he might never do so again. But he could not move. He was an outcast from Meg and her world, at the same time he was barred by ignorance from that of the grown-ups. He was relegated to a no-man's-land where he had to endure both the pangs of regret and those of foreboding.

In Majuba Road, lipstick was regarded as 'common', used only by the girls of 'the back streets'. Mrs Blount used it, but she was a law to herself. As Alan's mother said: 'Mrs Blount is just a little bit *fast*,' hastily adding, 'but quite respectable.'

Molly now began to use it regularly. She chose a brilliant pillar-box red. It was the consistency of varnish paint. It formed a crust on her lips which made them pout as if they were stuck to an invisible mirror.

'Wipe that muck off your face!' Uncle Ernest told her. She dabbed at her mouth. 'Don't let me see you using it again.' Alan had never seen him so angry. The next evening Molly's lips were again coated with lipstick. Uncle Ernest appealed to her mother, but Aunt Glad was strangely reluctant to assert herself. She seemed afraid of Molly. When she found a smear of red on the roller towel, she pointed to it without saying a word. Molly muttered and swallowed as if she were about to burst into tears.

Back in the middle room she suddenly opened her handbag, looked at her parents from under her eyelashes, and then took

out a mirror and the lipstick. Aunt Glad stood with the teapot in her hand. Uncle Ernest dropped his newspaper.

'For the last time,' Uncle Ernest shouted, 'are you going to stop using that stuff?' Molly slowly raised her lashes and looked at him: her eyes filled with tears. She shook her head.

Aunt Glad leaped to her feet. She gave a deep sigh: her patience broke. 'Do you know what you are?' A Jezebel! She dropped the teapot. It smashed into fragments. A rivulet of brown liquid trickled across the floor towards the bamboo table where Alan and Meg were sitting. There was an exclamation from the front room followed by footsteps. Alan knew that his parents were standing in the passage. He could imagine them looking at each other, his father with a hurt, puckered frown, his mother's face a conflict between solicitude for Molly and anxiety lest the neighbours could hear. Molly sat with her shoulders hunched up. Her cheek quivered but she sighed as if in relief. Aunt Glad stood among the broken pieces of the teapot. 'A Jezebel!' she screamed again. 'Look at yourself! Not long turned fifteen and in *that* disgusting condition!' Molly flinched. 'Oh, I'm not referring to the lipstick. Don't think I don't know – however much *he* may shut his eyes!' She turned on her husband. '*He* only believes what he wants to believe. But did you think *I* was blind? Oh, I know what you've been up to. You . . . you . . . *slut!*' Her voice changed into a wail. 'Haven't you *any* decency? Haven't you any feeling for us? . . .' She waved her hand as if she were searching for words. 'Do you want to break your father's heart?' she cried. 'Look at him! You . . . you've *killed* him!' And she jerked her thumb at Uncle Ernest, who jumped. Alan felt a wild desire to laugh. One of the tongues of tea touched his knee: he checked it with his handkerchief.

Aunt Glad took a fresh breath. 'A pretty pickle you've got yourself into, haven't you, madam? A pretty pickle you've got *us* into! You and your gallivanting on that motor-bike. Haven't

you got any self-respect? When did it happen? Come on! Out with it!

'I don't want to talk about it, Mummy,' Molly said in a shrill, child-like voice.

'So you don't want to talk about it? That's very nice, that is. "Don't want to talk about it, Mummy!" – as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. Well, *I* want to talk about it! You're going to get a piece of my tongue, my girl. I suppose you think he'll respect you for it? Not a bit of it! He'll soon give *you* the push now – you mark my words. If there is only one of them, that is. I suppose it *was* Victor? Out with it! Come on! Speak up!'

Molly began to sob. The sight of the lipstick stains on her handkerchief provoked Aunt Glad to fresh fury. She stamped her heel among the spilled tea-leaves.

'You know where you'll end up, don't you? You know *how* you'll end up? Shall I spell it out for you? Shall I? Shall I?'

Molly let out a cry as the door opened and Victor stood there. Behind him were ranged the frightened faces of Alan's mother and father, and behind them that of Uncle Hector wearing a hurt, incredulous expression. Mrs Blount hovered on the edge of the group, throwing imploring glances at Uncle Hector. Victor was pale and dishevelled. His eyes sought Molly. She was sitting at the table, her arms spread among the tea-things. She laid her face on her forearms: the pressure pushed out her mouth on which the lipstick was now badly smeared. She looked as if she might fall asleep, but every now and then a shudder ran through her body.

'Darling!' Victor cried.

'Don't you "darling" her!' Aunt Glad shouted, barring his way, arms akimbo. 'Don't you *dare* go near her!'

'He was only passing by.' The trembling voice of Alan's mother came from the doorway. It took on a note of anguish. 'He *heard* the row. . . . *Everybody* can hear!' Aunt Glad swept a contemptuous look across the faces lurking in the passage.

'I'll give him "passing by"!' she yelled at the top of her voice. 'I'll see to it that he passes by *for good!*' Victor's Adam's apple worked up and down. Aunt Glad turned on him. 'Don't you dare come snivelling to me! I've had enough of you and your underhand ways. You'll be saying it was *her* fault next, I suppose. . . . Was it? Was it?' She moved forward threateningly. Victor backed away. Molly lifted her head and wailed.

At the doorway Victor stood his ground. Some colour came into his face. 'Of course I don't blame her,' he said. 'I take full responsibility. . . .'

"Full responsibility!" Do you hear that? Aunt Glad appealed to the audience in the passage.

This was now swelled by the addition of Great-uncle Charlie who was fingering his moustache and murmuring: 'I say! I say, Glad old girl! I say!'

Aunt Glad went off into a shriek of laughter. "Full responsibility." Oh, I like that! "Full responsibility." He must have got that out of a book!

'I suppose,' she said with ominous calm, 'that you'll be telling us next that you want to marry her?'

'Yes,' Victor said eagerly. 'I do! I do!'

'Marry her!' Aunt Glad shrieked. 'Marry her! Why, you couldn't support a performing flea!'

'I . . . I . . . ' Victor muttered.

'*You!*' Aunt Glad turned to Uncle Ernest. 'What d'you think you're doing—standing there like a stuffed dummy? Aren't you master in your own house? Letting him push his way in here. Listening to his smarmy excuses? Haven't you got any pride? You're as bad as your daughter. . . . Well? Well? Aren't you going to *do* something?'

Uncle Ernest went up to Victor and took hold of his arm. Victor resisted. Uncle Ernest looked at him in anguish. Victor allowed himself to be pushed into the passage. A chorus of whispered advice urged him to go.

'I'll be back!' he shouted over his shoulder. 'You wait! I'll be back!'

'You! . . . You!' Aunt Glad spluttered. 'Here – you! Out of my way you . . . you *chicken*!' She thrust Uncle Ernest aside and bounded out of the room.

'Leave him alone!' Molly cried.

'He's gone,' Alán's mother said from the passage. Then, as she thought of the neighbours: 'Arthur! Is that front door shut?'

Aunt Glad darted back into the middle room. She marched up to Molly. 'Did you say "Leave him alone"?''

'Yes I did!' Molly replied. 'I won't have you blaming Victor. It was my fault. And we want to get married!'

'Oh, indeed? So it was your fault, was it? What *you* want, my girl, is a damn good hiding.' She raised her hand. Molly jumped up from her chair and faced her: her eyes were as fierce as her mother's. 'Now then, Glad! Now then!' Uncle Ernest said. 'Steady, Glad girl! Steady!' Great-uncle Charlie called out from the passage. Aunt Glad lowered her fist. 'I don't know what we're going to do with you.' Her voice faltered. 'Look at you! Standing there as bold as brass. I . . . I don't believe you've got an atom of shame in you.'

'I've done nothing to be . . .' Molly began, then stopped short and blushed, appalled at what she had been about to say and at the same time realising that perhaps she had meant it. Her face puckered up: she hung her head.

'Oh, so you've done nothing to be ashamed of!' Aunt Glad cried. Her face turned scarlet. 'That I should live to hear it! Oh! Oh! . . . You *hussy*! I . . . I said I'd tell you where you'd end up, didn't I? Well, you're going to hear it, my girl! On the streets! On the streets! And *that's* where you'd better go now! Do you hear me? And don't *dare* show your face in here again!'

'Do you mean it, Mother?' Molly asked in a trembling voice.

'Yes! Yes!' her mother screamed, though her voice, too, trembled. 'I never want to set eyes on you again!'

'All right!' Molly sobbed. 'I'll go! I'll go!' Holding one hand in front of her as if she could not see her way, she ran out of the room. Before anyone thought of stopping her she had rushed sobbing into Majuba Road.

'Come back, girl!' Great-uncle Charlie cried.

'Really! This is *too* much,' Uncle Hector muttered.

'Thank goodness it's dark – nobody will see. . . . Oh, poor Molly!' Alan's mother said. There was a movement at the top of the stairs.

'What's happening?' Alan's grandmother called out in a quavering voice. 'What's the fuss about? Who are all these people?'

'It's all right, Mother.' Alan's father replied. 'You go back to your room.'

'But I thought I heard Molly. . . . You must go to her. She needs looking after.'

'It's all right, Mam. You leave it to us!' Uncle Hector's voice boomed out.

'Ah, is that you, Hector? You'll see to it, won't you, my boy?'

'Now don't you worry, Mam!'

There was a sigh from the top of the stairs and a shuffling of feet. A whispered consultation began in the passage. In the middle room Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest avoided each other's eyes. Alan stood in front of the bamboo table, his heart pounding. Meg's frightened face protruded through the fringe of the cloth.

'Has she gone?' Aunt Glad asked at last in a dull voice.

'Who?' Uncle Ernest replied, looking round him in a bewildered way.

'Molly, of course.'

'Yes, she's gone.'

'How long ago was that?' Uncle Ernest stared at her.

'I . . . I don't know,' he muttered, 'I can't remember.'

'Well, what are you standing there for?' Aunt Glad shrieked. 'After her, you fool! After her!'

Uncle Ernest, a look of joy and relief on his face, dashed through the knot of onlookers and out of the house. Alan's father, Great-uncle Charlie and Uncle Hector followed. Alan's mother and Mrs Blount entered the middle room. Aunt Glad had collapsed into a chair. She felt round her waist. Alan's mother took off her own apron and handed it to her. Aunt Glad placed it over her head and began to rock herself to and fro.

A few minutes later they heard footsteps, followed by whispering. The door of the middle room was pushed open. The faces of Alan's father, Great-uncle Charlie and Uncle Hector appeared. They shook their heads. Aunt Glad did not remove the apron. She sat motionless beneath it: when nothing was said her shoulders heaved and she crouched in her chair.

Ten minutes passed, then the door was flung open and Uncle Ernest burst into the room. 'Glad! Glad!' he cried. 'Oh, Glad! I can't find her!'

Aunt Glad crouched still lower. One hand emerged from beneath the apron and sought her husband's. Then it disengaged itself, fumbled for his head, and drew it to her breast. Uncle Ernest began to sob. Meg's voice rose in a wail.

There was a loud whisper from Uncle Hector: 'We'd better get the police.' The body beneath the apron heaved. Uncle Ernest lifted his head and looked appealingly at his sister-in-law. 'Oh no! *Not* the police!' she breathed, then added: 'Oh dear, poor Molly! Perhaps . . .'

There was a timid knock at the front door. Absolute silence descended. A moment later there was the sound of footsteps along the passage. The door of the middle room was softly opened and Mrs Cowcher appeared, holding Molly by the hand.

'I found her,' Mrs Cowcher said, and pushed Molly gently

forward. Aunt Glad sat tense beneath the apron, not daring to believe her ears. 'Mum!' Molly said in a small voice. Aunt Glad threw the apron aside and held out her arms. Molly flung herself into them. Mrs Blount beckoned to Alan and Meg. Everybody left the middle room.

'Where's Mrs Cowcher?' Uncle Ernest said when they were in the passage. 'I want to thank her.' But Mrs Cowcher had gone.

Alan heard a shuffling at the top of the stairs. He looked up. His grandmother was leaning over the banister. 'Is everything all right?' she asked. 'Are they looking after that girl?' Alan nodded. 'Then that's all right!' she muttered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mrs Blount had persuaded Aunt Glad to make a costume for her. Molly helped her mother in the evenings. They wanted to be together as much as possible. The spectacle of the two heads bent over their work, the cheerful chugging of the machine, interspersed with tender remarks affected the whole household. Even Uncle Hector kept away from the middle room, and on several occasions brought back small presents from his visits to Cheltenham. Alan began to believe that life had returned to its old tenor. Perhaps he need no longer stand upright: perhaps he could slip back to his old place.

He hurried to Meg. There was a spell of mild weather. She was sitting in the den surrounded by her dolls. She pushed them into a corner, banging each one savagely to demonstrate its insignificance by comparison with his own presence. He found an old piece of sacking and threw it over the branches to compensate for the lack of foliage. They sat, side by side, munching the biscuits which Mr Cowcher had provided.

At the end of a fortnight Uncle Ernest was despatched for Victor. He had called on the day after his dismissal, but Alan's mother had taken him aside and persuaded him to bide his time. Now he was ushered into the middle room.

At the end of half an hour Uncle Ernest was also admitted. From the front room Alan listened to the murmur of voices. Gradually the tone changed. He heard Aunt Glad go out to the kitchen with something of her former dash. The rest of Victor's visit was accompanied by the clatter of crockery and even a tremulous laugh from Aunt Glad and Molly. Again Alan was aware of mysterious preparations that threatened the old way

of life. Though Victor had been accepted back into the fold, his status had changed. There was not the same atmosphere of gaiety and surprise about his visits. There were fixed times when he and Molly were left together in the middle room while Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest adjourned to the kitchen. Both Victor and Molly were more sedate: even the hooting of Victor's horn was muted – and he was talking of selling the motor-bike.

Mr Blount still went to his office in the Department of Customs and Excise: that he was allowed to do so was seen as further evidence of his 'superiority' and of the benevolence of that Olympian body, the Civil Service. But he could no longer get about without help. He was to be seen leaning on his wife's arm as he shuffled painfully along to the bus-stop which was opposite Number Twenty. His head was pushed forward: there was a look of intense concentration on his face, as if his spirit had already left his body and was pushing from behind. In his free hand he carried a walking-stick – he held his arm bent and rigid as if a hundredweight were fastened to the ferrule. When the bus arrived, Mrs Blount pushed from below and the conductor pulled from above: at the other end a junior met the bus and guided him to the office.

As soon as the bus was out of sight a look of relief would cross Mrs Blount's face. She would steal a glance at the window of the house opposite. Uncle Hector would watch from behind the curtain, a grin on his face. After a while he took to standing in full view, smoking a cigar and pretending to examine the surrounding chimney-pots. Mrs Blount would cross the road, to inquire how the costume was progressing. On these occasions Uncle Hector would stroll into the middle room as if by accident. He said little to Mrs Blount and he seldom looked at her, but her eyes sparkled and the hands that held the pieces of material trembled.

Alan was sitting behind the old leather wing-chair in the

front room one morning when the door cautiously opened and Uncle Hector entered. He stood in front of the window. He was wearing his belted mackintosh and the green trilby. A moment later he waved his cigar and hurried from the room. Alan got up from his hiding-place and looked out of the window. Uncle Hector was at the bus-stop talking to Mrs Blount. Uncle Hector took her by the elbow. They glanced quickly to left and right and then Uncle Hector piloted her round the corner. A few seconds later Alan heard the banging of the double doors of the builder's yard where Uncle Hector garaged his car, followed by the sound of the engine starting up. There was a sound behind him: he thought it was the closing of the door. He went into the passage. His grandmother was standing there. She peered at him vaguely, then very slowly began to climb the stairs.

He was at the window again at six o'clock when Mr Blount arrived back from work. He saw the conductor look out, shake his head and then help Mr Blount down. Mr Blount waited for several minutes. Then he began to shuffle slowly along the road. He had gone a few yards when Mrs. Cowcher appeared, in her usual unexpected manner as if she had risen from the ground, and took him by the arm.

'Do you know,' Mrs Blount said to Aunt Glad later that evening, 'I went to Worgrove this afternoon to visit my Aunt Hilda - and I missed the train back.' She cocked her head on one side as she heard Uncle Hector's heavy tread in his room above. 'There I was for two hours,' she went on, 'with nothing to keep me company but a row of milk-floats.'

'But what about Mr Blount?' Aunt Glad asked. Mrs Blount shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know. He was there when I got back. I suppose somebody must have given him a hand.'

'Mrs Cowcher!' Alan exclaimed. He could have bitten off his tongue. It was an unwritten law that he and Meg should never join in the conversation when they were sitting behind the

bamboo table. It was their formula for 'going invisible'.

'I mean – it might have been Mrs Cowcher,' he muttered. 'She does pop up in the most unexpected places,' Aunt Glad pointed out. 'Who does?' a querulous voice asked. Alan's grandmother had entered the room. 'Why, Mrs Cowcher, Mother,' Aunt Glad explained, speaking gently as if she were humouring a child. Her mother muttered and sat down. Uncle Hector strode into the room. 'Hello! Hello! Hello!' he cried. 'I've had a wonderful day – called on old Charlie Kircross in Stroud – used to be in the same outfit in Mesopotamia. . . . Well, if it isn't Mrs Blount! How *do* you do, Mrs Blount?' Alan felt that he had taken on another burden, that he was an unwilling conspirator in a plot he did not understand. It was associated, in an equally bewildering way, with his grandmother. Whenever he felt the nagging sensation in his bowels, she was at hand. She had taken to wandering round the house so silently that no one else appeared to notice her. He was always encountering her in the darkness of the passages or the landing, and it seemed to him that she stared at him with peculiar intensity: he would press himself against the wall to let her pass. Often in his dreams he was aware of a dusky presence at his back such as he had sensed in the front room when he was watching Uncle Hector and Mrs Blount through the window. Once he found himself alone with her. 'Sit on Granny's lap,' she whispered. He half sat, half leaned against her. 'You're too big! A *big* boy, eh?' she said, with something of the old flattery – but at the same time he thought he detected an undertone of mockery. She asked him questions about everyday matters – books he was reading, things that had happened at school – just as she had done in the past, but he had the feeling that she was looking behind his answers for something else. But what? Was it the 'secret' he possessed about Uncle Hector and Mrs Blount? He longed to tell her about it, but loyalty to Uncle Hector held him back. He did not know why it might be important: he was

no longer sure about anything: the slightest word or action seemed capable of assuming an atmosphere of menace. His grandmother seemed equally bewildered by her rôle. Her hand on his head trembled, and then as they looked at it – without her volition – it became a claw. Tears stood in her eyes, but they held a glitter of malevolence. Alan felt that for reasons beyond their comprehension or control they had been forced into the positions of antagonists. They were engaged in a duel upon an issue of which they were completely ignorant. The new-found tranquillity which the rest of the household enjoyed had in some way been achieved at their expense.

If the duel between them, whatever it was about and whoever it concerned, had to be fought, there was nothing the scapegoats could do about it.

The changes in his grandmother terrified him. Instead of the neat buckled shoes, she wore an old pair of carpet slippers: the soles had come adrift so that they flapped as she walked. Her ankles were swollen and her stockings awry. She had developed odd tastes in food: she was forever sending Meg to the baker's for dripping cakes. She ate them noisily, wiping her fingers on her skirts. She had taken to wearing an old shawl round her shoulders: it had once been black, but was now a brownish purple like an old plum. Her hair had changed colour: it had been silvery white, now it unexpectedly sprouted strands of dingy brown and iron-grey. Her face looked pinched with cold. There were clusters of brownish veins round her mouth and nostrils.

Perhaps after all it was not a duel, but a contest to decide which of them could take the most punishment? Perhaps his grandmother was trying to protect him, and the ravages in her appearance were the result of his own evasions and cowardice? There was no end to the possibilities of guilt.

Alan saw Mr Blount get off the bus a good fifteen minutes

before his usual time and cross the road in the direction of Number Twenty. He ran into the middle room and sat in a chair against the far wall. After an interminable interval there was a knock. It was so faint that it might have been a scurry of leaves blown against the door. Neither Aunt Glad nor his mother heard it. The thought of that arm once more slowly lifting towards the knocker was more than Alan could bear, and he burst out: 'The door! The door!'

His mother jumped to her feet and hurried out. There was a shuffling noise like the dragging of a body. At last the door of the middle room opened and Mr Blount entered leaning on the arm of Alan's mother. Aunt Glad got up and helped to guide him to the nearest chair. He dropped his walking-stick. Alan's mother stooped to pick it up: in slow motion Mr Blount interposed his arm. She stayed in a kneeling position watching fascinated as he directed the unwilling pulleys of his body to retrieve it. Eventually he sat upright. He looked about him through his gold-rimmed spectacles. His eyebrows were a ginger colour: by contrast with his other movements their twitching seemed extraordinarily rapid.

'Why, this is a pleasure. . . .' Aunt Glad ventured.

'Would you . . . would you like a cup of tea?' Alan's mother asked.

Mr Blount's lips moved. His voice emerged like air escaping from a deflated football. 'I want to see your brother-in-law.' He took hold of his stick and tried to bang it on the floor. Again it fell from his grasp. He let it lie. Aunt Glad stood up. 'I'll see if he's in.'

Mr Blount's lips moved again. 'Please do so.' Aunt Glad left the room.

Mr Blount focused his gaze on Alan's mother. The ginger eyebrows arched. There was a fixed gleam in his pale eyes, like the last spurt of a candle-flame. It disconcerted Alan's mother. 'Are you *sure* you wouldn't like a cup of tea?' she asked in

desperation. She looked up in relief as Aunt Glad returned with Uncle Hector.

Uncle Hector stood in front of Mr Blount, hands thrust in his pockets. The clefts on either side of his nostrils deepened until they met the down-turned corners of his mouth. Mr Blount struggled to his feet. For a moment Alan thought that the energy emanating from Uncle Hector would knock him back into his seat. But the points in his eyes bored against the other's bulk. Uncle Hector flushed. 'Why, if it isn't the Civil Servant!' he said loudly. Mr Blount turned to the women. 'Leave us,' he said in his far-away whisper.

'But, Mr Blount . . .' Aunt Glad began. His eyebrows descended. Without another word the two women left the room.

'Well, what do you want with *me*?' Uncle Hector said. He seemed startled by the volume of his own voice. He strode to the door, seized the knob and rattled it. There was a scampering of feet outside. 'Prying women!' he growled. He faced Mr Blount again. 'Well?' he repeated.

'You upset my wife when you were here before,' Mr Blount began.

'So?'

'When your own wife was alive.'

'You leave Cora out of it!'

'You leave my wife out of it!'

'And what if she doesn't *want* me to?'

'Do as I say!'

'Look who's trying to give *me* orders!' Uncle Hector cried.

Mr Blount looked at him steadily. 'I was forgetting you were an officer and a gentleman.'

'Don't you get sarcastic with me!'

'I suppose with a person of your type it's pointless . . .'

'What do you mean "a person of my type"? . . . Are you appealing to my "better instincts"? Is that it?'

Mr Blount's voice seemed to come from even farther away.

'I don't imagine you've got any. . . . But yes – for my wife's sake, I'd better try . . .'

'Why, do you think you can give her more than I can?'

For the first time Mr Blount's face showed some colour. An expression of contempt crossed it. 'I can give her very little. You know that perfectly well. But even *that's* more than *you* could give her.'

The corners of Uncle Hector's mouth drooped.

'I won't have a milk-sop of a civilian speaking to me like that!' he blustered. 'If you were half a man . . .'

'I'm more of a man than *you'll* ever be,' Mr Blount said. 'You're nothing but a braggart and a bully . . . really, I thought Muriel had better taste . . . What's more – like all bullies, you're a coward!'

Uncle Hector's face turned purple. 'Why! . . . You! . . . You! . . .' he roared. He thrust his face close to Mr Blount's. Mr Blount staggered and fell back. He missed the seat of the chair and slid down, coming to stop with the small of his back against it and one knee resting on the floor. Uncle Hector raised his fist. Alan opened his mouth to scream, but he was arrested by a movement – or rather the deflection of a movement. Mr Blount began to raise his arm to protect himself. Then he stopped: very slowly and deliberately he returned the arm to his side. He crouched there, his pale face upturned, the cold points of his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Uncle Hector.

Uncle Hector stared down at him. He glanced at his fist, then lowered it, muttered something and strode to the door. In the doorway he looked back. In his expression Alan read bewilderment and – was it possible? – something that looked like fear.

Mr Blount remained where he was for several minutes. Alan wanted to rush forward and help, but he dared not do so. He was more in awe of Mr Blount than he was of Uncle Hector himself. He felt a pang of shame. At last Mr Blount began the

dreadful slow-motion process of hauling himself to his feet. It seemed to Alan as he watched that Mr Blount was composed of two quite separate parts: there was the inert weight of his body and there was another creature, tiny but utterly fearless, that pushed and pulled at it, like an insect struggling with concentrated fury to shift a stone that has fallen on top of it, or an ant heaving at a burden a hundred times its own size. The source of this energy lay in the points of Mr Blount's eyes: their anger and contempt were directed now against the incubus of his body.

At last he was on his feet and shuffling towards the door. Alan forced himself to retrieve the walking-stick. He held it out. Mr Blount's hand came out and the fingers began to close round the stick: Alan shuddered and almost let go. Mr Blount looked down at him. There was a faint smile on his face: perhaps of compassion, perhaps of pride.

'How dare he come round like that!' Mrs Blount exclaimed at tea the next day. 'Worrying poor Hector!' Her voice trembled. 'And it's not good for Stanley in his state. . . .' Her collar-bones had grown more prominent: her neck looked longer. Her cheek-bones were red: Alan suspected from his mother's expression that she was using more rouge than was permissible even for the wife of a Civil Servant. She began to talk and laugh loudly. In waving her hand to emphasise some point, she spilled her cup over the new costume. Alan's mother picked up a cloth and began to mop up the tea. Aunt Glad knelt in front of her friend and rubbed with her handkerchief. Mrs Blount burst into tears.

'There! Did it scald?' Aunt Glad asked. Mrs Blount nodded: her lips quivered. 'Yes! Yes!' she said. And then suddenly: 'Oh, I love him! I love him so much!'

'But what about your *husband*?' Alan's mother cried. Her voice conveyed understanding, secret delight and horror at her own duplicity.

'I don't care *that* for my husband!' Mrs Blount snapped her fingers. Her sobs became louder. Alan's mother patted her arm. Aunt Glad flung her arms round Mrs Blount, buried her head in her lap and herself burst into vociferous tears. Mrs Blount raised her hand and looked at it wonderingly. 'No! I don't care *that* for him!' she repeated, and once again snapped her fingers. 'This time she produced a louder noise. For some reason it caused her to redouble her sobs. Aunt Glad, too, burrowing her head into her friend's skirts, cried more loudly than ever. Alan's mother pulling her chair closer put her arm round Mrs Blount's shoulders while two big tears welled out of her eyes. Meg tugged at Alan's sleeve. She pointed at the women. 'Look!' she said, with a cherubic smile. 'Silly!'

At length a semblance of calm was restored. The women drank their cups of tea and toyed with their cakes. But the atmosphere was strained. Mrs Blount was pale and reserved. Aunt Glad sniffed every now and then at the memory of her own tears. Alan's mother kept glancing at Mrs Blount as if she saw her for the first time. Her expression was puzzled: it contained, too, a reproach that by shedding real tears Mrs Blount had broken the romantic circle in which she had placed her.

There was a knock at the front door. Before anyone could answer, footsteps scurried along the passage and the door of the middle room opened. 'A'ternoon, all,' Great-aunt Gwen said affably. Before they could recover from their surprise at the intrusion the visitors had seated themselves. Great-uncle Edward was wearing the overcoat with the greasy velvet collar: his wife was carrying the inevitable paper parcel.

'So there's to be a weddin', eh?' she said.

'Yes, there is!' Aunt Glad snapped. The newcomers grinned at each other and winked. 'What did you say?' Aunt Glad demanded.

'We said nowt, me girl,' Great-uncle Edward replied.

'Wot I *will* say,' Great-aunt Gwen said, turning her eyes towards the ceiling, 'is -'eavins be praised for small mercies!'

'I expec' you're hurryin' things on, like?' Great-uncle Edward leaned forward and patted Aunt Glad's knee in a travesty of avuncular concern. 'One o' they Registry make-dos, I s'pose?'

'It will be a *white* wedding,' Aunt Glad replied frigidly, '*with* a reception.'

'*We* ain't 'ad our invites.'

'No! And you're not likely to.'

Great-aunt Gwen and her husband pursed their lips, and sorrowfully shook their heads to and fro. 'Well, you'd better get a move on,' Great-aunt Gwen said at last, with a sigh, 'if you don't want tongues to wag.'

'Let them wag! There are too many busy-bodies about by far. I mention no names. . . .'

'Oh ah? . . . Well, we didn't come to flaunt yer shame in front o' yer very eyes.'

'What *did* you come for? I'm sure *I* didn't ask you.'

'Snap! Snap! You want to be careful o' that there tongue o' yours, me girl. The devil'll bite it off one o' ~~these~~ days.'

'As a matter o' fac', Great-uncle Edward said, 'we came becos we wanted to *sympathise*.'

Aunt Glad gave a caustic laugh. 'Oh? What about this time?'

'It's 'ard. It's 'ard.' Great-uncle Edward shook his head lugubriously. 'It's 'ard when grey 'airs is bowed low. At 'is age! The *disgrace*!'

'What disgrace?'

'Wy, ain't you 'eard?' Great-aunt Gwen took over. 'The Guv'nor's 'ad to sell 'is 'orses.' Aunt Glad was calm. 'Pooh! *That*!' she said. 'I've known about it for ages.'

'Ah, but it's a sad day! A sad day!' Great-uncle Edward sighed.

'Not that it ain't a judgment,' his wife added, folding her mouth into prim lines.

'I should have thought,' Mrs Blount said in her grandest manner, 'I should have *thought* that this was hardly the occasion to raise the matter.'

'Oh, la-di-da!' Great-aunt Gwen cried.

'It's a *family* matter, missis,' Great-uncle Edward chimed in.

'I happen to be present as a guest – an *invited* guest,' Mrs Blount replied. 'The guest of an old friend . . . a friend who has just been very kind to me. . . .'

'Oh, I'm sure *you* got lots o' friends to be kind to you,' Great-aunt Gwen cried. 'Friends wot takes you for drives in their cars – and suchlike!'

Mrs Blount flushed.

'We wos in Chelten'am again yesterday,' Great-uncle Edward interposed, with a reflective air as if addressing no one in particular.

'Wy, so we wos!' his wife cackled.

'Ad to take a load o' spuds to 'Arrises in the 'Igh Street. didn't we?' Great-uncle Edward winked.

'That's right . . . Now let me see – oo was it we saw in the 'Igh Street?'

'I can't rightly remember. Now oo c'd it 'ave bin?' They went through a show of frowning, scratching heads and pulling lips.

'Wy!' Great-uncle Edward cried at last. 'It were 'is nibs!'

'So it were. Clean slipped me memory.' Mrs Blount flinched.

'Oo – I mean who do you mean?' Aunt Glad asked.

'Yer lodger.'

''Ector issel!' They turned towards each other and began to laugh silently.

'An' 'e weren't alone, neither,' Great-uncle Edward gasped, stifling his laughter.

'Not 'im!' his wife echoed. 'What do you mean?' Mrs Blount brought out. Aunt Glad shook her head at her as if to warn her against inquiring further. Alan's mother, who was quick at

grasping emotional implications, turned to Great-aunt Gwen with a sickly smile. 'I've been thinking,' she said, 'about that writing-cabinet. . . . Perhaps it wasn't *quite* . . .' She swallowed. 'Would you like it back?' Great-aunt Gwen and her husband went off into a fresh paroxysm of mirth: their eyes watered: they displayed their gums: they jerked their thumbs derisively in the direction of Alan's mother.

'Oh! Oh!' Great-uncle Edward wheezed.

'Oh dear! Oh dear!' his wife said. 'You can't put ^{us} off *that* easy.' She wiped her eyes, and then suddenly snapped out: 'E was wiv a bit o' skirt!'

'Trust our 'Ector!' her husband added. Mrs Blount got up unsteadily. Aunt Glad tried to put her arm round her. Mrs Blount drew back and proffered her cheek. She shook hands stiffly with Alan's mother who gazed at her with dumb eyes. She nodded bleakly at the visitors and, holding herself very straight, left the room. 'Don't yer want to know oo it were?' Great-aunt Gwen called after her.

'She can guess!' Aunt Glad snapped. But Great-uncle Edward was not to be cheated. He scrambled to his feet, flung open the door and shouted down the passage: 'It were Nurse Crossett, Mrs Blount! Nurse Crossett!' The front door banged. He returned to his chair and sat down muttering: 'Don't know wot we're comin' to. You tries to do someone a good turn – and look 'ow they be'ave.'

'The *side* that woman's got!' his wife agreed. 'To 'ear 'er talk you'd think she was chewin' toffee. Needs takin' down a peg or two – if you ask me.'

'No one *did* ask you!' Aunt Glad cried, her eyes flashing.

'We wos only tryin' to 'elp.' Her aunt adopted her cringing manner.

'She's bin gettin' those pains in 'er side,' Great-uncle Edward whined.

'I'll give her pains!'

'Now, now, me girl! Ain't yer goin' to give yer pore old aunt a nice cup o' tea?' Alan's mother automatically stretched out her hand to the tea-pot. Aunt Glad glared at her. 'Tea's over!' she said. Her aunt sighed and, clasping the newspaper parcel in one hand and pressing the other to her side, got up. 'Ah well! 'Spose we'd better be gettin' along,' she sighed. 'There's some on us as got *work* to do.' At the door she stopped. 'Ow's yer pore old mother?' she asked Aunt Glad.

'She's sleeping. And she's going on sleeping.'

'Wot, ain't I allowed to see me own sister?'

'No, you're not!'

'Ah, I can see when we old 'uns ain't wanted.' Shaking their heads and simulating extreme decrepitude, Great-aunt Gwen and Great-uncle Edward shuffled out of the house.

Uncle Ernest was shouting something from the garden. They all hurried out. There was a glow in the sky above the back streets.

'Pretty!' Meg cried.

'What is it?' Molly asked.

'It's a fire!' At that moment there was a coughing noise, and the glare brightened and spread like the opening of an orange gladiolus. The light disclosed shadowy figures in the back gardens to their right and left and lit up the grass at their feet. Then it died down so abruptly that they moved closer together like people on a raft. The dull glow remained.

'Where is it, do you think?' Aunt Glad asked.

'It must be the jam factory,' Uncle Ernest said. The Cowchers' hedge rustled. 'Excuse me!' a timid voice called out. They looked at each other in astonishment. Direct address across hedge or fence was discouraged in Majuba Road. Neighbours had to be on terms of great intimacy to ignore the boundaries of privacy. It was surprising that the Cowchers should flout them.

'Excuse me,' Mrs Cowcher said, 'I *did* knock at the front door, but you were out. . . . I thought you'd want to know – it's the Riding School . . . ' They hurried back into the house and collected their hats and coats. No one stopped to wonder how Mrs Cowcher had come by the information, but no one doubted its accuracy.

The Town and County Riding School was approached by a series of narrow lanes lined with ancient half-timbered houses. The firemen had succeeded in confining the fire to the school, but every now and then when a beam fell they trained their hoses on the near-by buildings: other firemen appeared at windows and on roof-tops as they made precautionary tours of inspection.

The narrow lanes were packed with spectators who kept tripping over the hoses and getting in the firemen's way. The crowd overflowed into the main street and policemen were trying to keep a way clear for traffic. One of the policemen recognised Uncle Ernest and, unlocking an iron grill, led the way through a private alleyway. At the end of this, under an archway, they found the Guv'nor's family. The Guv'nor's wife was almost unrecognisable: she had obviously put on every garment within reach and had slung coats, capes, furs, scarves and shawls round her shoulders. She was surrounded by trunks, cases, bags, boxes and sacks, a sewing-machine, a hip-bath in which lay a grandfather clock, the gramophone with its green horn – and a cage with a canary which sang lustily in the false dawn. Watchman and several smaller dogs wandered in and out among these belongings, whining or barking. Every now and then they went up to the cage and stared at it with their tongues hanging out. One of the dogs had singed his flank and was licking away the burnt hairs. Doris and Hetty stood on either side of their mother, staring fixedly at the fire. The Guv'nor stood behind them: the flames flickered on his glass eye. There was a sudden crash as the main roof collapsed. The

chimney-stacks at either end wavered for a moment, then they, too, fell amid a shower of sparks and rose-coloured ash. Alan could not believe his eyes. It seemed impossible that the building could lose its familiar rambling outlines so suddenly. What a moment before had been so solid, honeycombed with so many mysterious spaces, had flattened like an inflated paper bag under the blow of a fist. For some time after the superstructure had collapsed, however, he could hear a hollow roar from below ground-level. He shuddered as he remembered the old cellars and harness-rooms through which he and Meg had wandered in a past that seemed centuries ago. A few seconds later the glow in the sky began to fade as if someone had dimmed a bank of lights, though there was still a faint glow from the site itself, and small flames sprang up every now and then like yellow crocuses. The Guv'nor's wife began to sob. Doris and Hetty swore. 'Well, that's that!' the Guv'nor said.

'Thank God you'd got rid of the horses!' Alan's father said.

'Very timely!' The Guv'nor turned to his son. 'Timely's the word – eh, Ernest?' The light from the lamp over the alley-way fell on his face. Alan could have sworn he saw the sound eye close in a wink: perhaps a speck of ash had got into it.

On the way home they met Uncle Hector. Who was to get his supper, he would like to know. Yes, he had heard about the fire, but he had something more important on his mind 'I hear those two old vultures called this afternoon?' Aunt Glad nodded. 'What were *they* after?'

'They wanted to cheer us up.'

'Is it likely? Come on – what were they up to?'

'They said they had seen you at Cheltenham,' Alan's mother blurted out. Uncle Hector grunted. 'I *thought* I saw that scruffy old bone-shaker of theirs in the High Street.'

'They said you were with Nurse Crossett.' Aunt Glad spoke accusingly.

'That's my business!'

'I thought Nurse Crossett was ancient history.'

'She has been staying with her folk . . . but that's my business, too.'

Alan's mother laid a hand on Uncle Hector's arm.

'But what about . . . oh, what about poor Muriel?' She was near to tears.

'Ah, yes. . . . Poor woman!' Uncle Hector shook his head. 'She has such a tempestuous nature. Her own worst enemy. Yes, her own worst enemy! . . . Why, do you know she was beginning to imagine that I . . . not that I gave her any encouragement? Ah, poor woman!' He sighed.

'You mean you're going to leave her alone?'

'He's dropping her, you mean!' Aunt Glad cried.

'What else can I do, my dear Gladys? I have tried to talk her out of it. Now I must spare her further suffering. I must think of her poor stricken husband. Have you forgotten Mr Blount?'

'Ye . . . s . . . ' Aunt Glad said doubtfully.

'I could not come between husband and wife!'

'No! No, of course not!' Alan's mother exclaimed. Her eyes shone. The romantic aura was being restored. Uncle Hector caught sight of her expression out of the corner of his eye. He sighed and clutched his forehead. 'It wasn't easy, mind you. . . . A man has his feelings. . . . But after all a gentleman has to do the decent thing.'

'Oh, you're so right!' she cried. Alan remembered the contemptuous glint in Mr Blount's eye. He had some difficulty in dismissing the treacherous thought.

Later that night he sat on the window-sill of his bedroom. In the corner-bed Molly lay on her back: she was making crooning noises in her sleep. In the other bed Meg kicked out her foot every now and then, muttering because it did not encounter his own. He looked out over the garden. A breeze ran through the hollyhocks and the elderberry tree. The propeller in the Curtises' garden began to whirr. The school playground looked

unutterably desolate: in the moonlight the asphalt had a bluish look like petrol: one end of the see-saw in the infants' corner stuck up like a bare branch. There were hollows and crevices in the brick wall where the mortar had crumbled. In the back streets beyond, a solitary yellow light shone in an attic window. A moment later it went out. The sky was dark and unruffled. The orange bloom that had hung there so recently had shed its petals and fallen back into the earth. He closed the windows. He looked down at Meg's shape beneath the bed-clothes. Her hair lay on the pillow, concealing her face except for a fragment of cheek. The stillness was broken by a blast of Greg's bugle; it stopped abruptly. He drew the curtains and climbed into bed. Meg straightened herself to make room for him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The house changed its shape as soon as Alan's mother and Aunt Glad had left it. The familiar noises that held it together – voices, footsteps, the popping of the gas-jets in the kitchen, the hiss of the water-taps – were hushed and walls and ceilings tilted: the whole house seemed to be straining from its foundations like a bubble about to break loose.

It was late February – another in-between season, like late autumn, neither one thing nor the other. It was not particularly cold, there was even a watery sun, but the light inside the house looked as if it were reflected from dirty snow. The banked fires gave little heat: the stale smell of winter permeated every corner.

Aunt Glad and his mother had gone to call at the Guv'nor's new place of business. The Guv'nor had, after all, landed on his feet. This was somehow connected with the fire. 'Almost as bad as the business with that awful horse,' his mother had said, frowning. 'Everybody's talking about it. . . .'

'Well, the insurance people paid up, didn't they?' his father had protested, looking uneasy.

'Yes – but not before they asked a lot of nasty questions.'

'The Guv'nor must have been able to answer them.'

'He had that garage going quick enough though.'

It had been a shock to see the Guv'nor without riding-breeches. His overalls, however, were of the most elegant design, with a monogram on the breast pocket. His face bore the same sardonic expression and his glass eye had the same frosty glint.

Doris and Hetty had adapted themselves with equal aplomb. The sight of their buxom forms in the tight overalls and their

dark hair escaping from beneath the peaked caps was attracting a flow of customers.

Their brothers, however, were miserable at the garage. After the first fortnight Fred obtained a job as coachman with a firm of undertakers. It was the only line of business nowadays, he explained, in which decent horses were to be found. He spent his spare time in the stables. His employers complained that at times when he should have been immobile on his seat he was usually to be found rubbing down his horses or massaging their fetlocks. But soon their satiny blackness became the pride of the profession.

Uncle Ernest stayed on out of loyalty to the Guv'nor. He showed no aptitude. He could not work the petrol-pumps, he could not pump up tyres, he could not unscrew metal caps and he hated the internal combustion engine. He was relegated to the job of cleaning the cars. This brought him some satisfaction because the word 'coachwork' reminded him of happier days. He still wore his riding-breeches. His face was set in morose lines, his brown eyes like those of a melancholy monkey. He laid the chamber's cloth on bonnet and mudguard as if he hoped that they might suddenly be transformed into horse flesh. He insisted that he couldn't get through the day without a visit from Aunt Glad. She said she couldn't bear it unless her sister-in-law accompanied her.

Five minutes after they had left the house, Alan and Meg heard their grandmother moving up and down the landing with odd jerky steps, banging the doors and opening and shutting drawers. A moment later she called out. Her voice was unrecognisably shrill. They peered up the staircase. She was leaning over the banister. Her face looked bigger: against the gloom of the landing it seemed to hang there disembodied: her eyes glittered.

'Who's there?' she called out.

'It's us, Granny,' Alan replied.

'Who? Who?'

'Us. Alan and Meg. . . .'

'Alan and Meg? Who's that? Is somebody playing a trick?'

'No, Granny. It's us. . . .'

'Oh, is that you down there, Glad? Have you brought some friends in to play? Why didn't you tell me?'

'It's . . . it's Alan and Meg . . .'

'Speak up, Glad! I don't know who you're talking about.'

Meg caught hold of Alan's hand. There was a moment's silence. Then the voice came again, more querulous:

'Isn't anyone going to get up today?' Alan and Meg looked at each other. 'Answer me, child!'

'We . . . we are up, Granny,' Alan replied in a quavering voice. 'It's the afternoon . . .'

'Is that you again, Glad? Has your father gone to work?'

Alan didn't know what to say.

'I hope you've had your breakfast?' his grandmother called out again. 'I must come down and see to the baby.' The head withdrew. There were a few shuffling steps along the landing. Meg broke out into a frightened wail.

'Cora!' her grandmother cried out, with thrilling intensity. 'Cora! Oh, don't cry, Cora! Wait for me! I'm coming! I'm coming!'

Alan turned, and pulling Meg after him raced into the front room. He dragged her behind the wing-chair. They knelt on the floor, their arms clasped round each other. Outside someone walked past with a brisk tap-tapping of heels. A child was whipping a top. A bus passed, shaking the panes of glass. They could have wept at the nearness of these sounds. But they were held as if by lead weights in the dim fastness of the house, silent now except for the beating of their hearts and the dreadful shuffling coming slowly down the stairs.

When it reached the bottom step it stopped. Alan held his breath. Meg bit her knuckles, her eyes staring. If the knob of

the door turned they knew they would scream. But at last the shuffling steps started again: they could tell by the rustling noise that accompanied them that their grandmother was feeling her way along the passage to the kitchen. They let out their breath: the leaping of their hearts subsided.

Again they became conscious of the cheerful noises beyond the bay-window. They listened hungrily. A crash and a scream from the direction of the kitchen sucked them violently back into the house. They listened intently. They were impervious now to the street noises, conscious only of the dreadful stillness that had descended upon the house. But was it absolute? Alan began to imagine that he could hear a faint sighing and rustling. He tried to dismiss these sounds from his mind. Perhaps it was Nipper washing himself somewhere: when the rest of the house was silent it sounded surprisingly loud. But he knew he was wrong.

At last he unfastened Meg's arms and stood up. He walked towards the door. Meg scrambled to her feet and ran after him. She put her arms round his waist. 'Not leave Meg!' she whimpered. He tried to push her away, then nodded. Hand-in-hand they tiptoed along the passage. The kitchen door was half open. From behind it came a strange snuffling noise. They turned tail and fled as far as the foot of the stairs. From the kitchen came a faint cry. They retraced their steps and pushed at the half-open door. It refused to move. They squeezed through the gap and into the kitchen. There was something behind the door. At first Alan did not associate it with anything human: it was an indeterminate black bundle, dropped there, or created out of the stuff of nightmares. A moment later the bundle stirred. Their grandmother lay face downwards; the clothes-line, with a row of handkerchiefs pegged to it, festooned her shoulders: she had always had difficulty in reaching it. One leg, in a black woollen stocking, twitched. A hand emerged from the bundle and moved across the floor. It nearly touched Meg's shoe. Meg

stared down at it and screamed. The movement of the hand stopped. The figure lay still, then, very slowly, the head lifted, and a puffy purple face looked up at them. Grotesque comparisons raced through Alan's mind. He remembered the seal he had seen at the circus: the twisted head, the slithering back portions. . . . He forced himself to look into the eyes. They flickered over his face. The swollen lips moved: sounds came from them.

'Help . . . help . . .' Then the head twisted again and flopped forward. It struck the stone floor. The horrifying sound galvanised Alan into action. Catching hold of Meg's hand he dragged her across the kitchen and flung open the door. He glanced back over his shoulder. His grandmother's arm was raised, her hand opened. Then he had slammed the door behind him and, dragging Meg after him, he raced down the garden. He stooped at the entrance to the den and dived into it. Meg tumbled in on top of him. They sat with their backs pressed against the Curtises' railings. A pang of grief seized Alan. He remembered that last movement of his grandmother's. The fingers had opened and touched the air softly, as if she were telling him that she understood that he was not to reproach himself, reassuring him of her love. But he knew that nothing could have induced him to remain in the house. He began to sob. Meg touched his cheek. She found a handkerchief and tried to dry his tears, but it was stiff with dirt. She studied his face with a puzzled frown; then with a sudden movement she opened her arms. He bent his head and leaned against her.

It was nearly dark when he drew away. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. He yawned. He felt drained of emotion. He noticed that there was still enough light to distinguish the tiny green studs already appearing on the branches. He was almost able to forget what had happened but soon he became aware of the scampering of feet and the slamming of

doors. Then the branches of the hedge were thrust aside. Molly looked down at them.

'You poor kids!' she said. 'I suppose you were alone when it happened?' She helped them out of the den. Alan longed to pour out the whole story but he could not speak. Molly put her arm round his shoulder. The three of them made their way to the house. •

At the door Meg hung back. She looked up at her sister. 'Gran - she fell down.'

Molly understood the gentle, ingratiating tone. 'She's not there any more. They've moved her,' she said.

Meg turned to Alan. 'S all right, Alan,' she whispered. But their eyes strayed to the corner behind the door: they pressed against Molly forcing her to avoid the spot.

They ran downstairs to breakfast the next morning as if nothing had happened. Neither of them mentioned their grandmother. When they returned from school in the afternoon they expressed no surprise when they saw that the blinds had been drawn in the front of the house. 'Well, thank goodness they've got over their fright!' Aunt Glad said. 'You see, we needn't have worried. Children have short memories. . . . Poor Mother.'

'Callous little brutes!' Uncle Hector growled. He did not keep his voice down: he swore when the women put their fingers on their lips. He kept striding up and down the room, muttering and glancing at the door. His face was red and his eyes bloodshot. The sweetish smell came from his mouth.

Alan and Meg crept down the passage unnoticed and out into the garden. Alan began to laugh and talk in exaggerated, lipping tones. Meg did not respond. She knew he was play-acting. He regarded her out of the corner of his eye. His heart began to sink. He and his grandmother had carried the family's burden. Had his failure to go to her assistance dragged Meg into the circle of guilt? He felt that their relationship must be

poisoned for ever. He stared through the tracery of twigs. In the course of a single day they had grown smoother. There was a faint tinge of olive on the old bark: there was a minute crack in one of the green studs.

He pushed open the door of the front room and advanced several steps before he remembered the drawn blinds. He stood listening. It was absolutely 'still. But yet there was something that impinged upon his consciousness as surely as if he had heard it. A hollow had been scooped out of the darkness: in this hollow there was a table and on top of it a long box above which it seemed to him minute flecks of displaced air rolled and turned. He approached the black box. His first impression was that someone had played a trick. The figure lying inside the box was not and never could have been human. It was a doll. It was not even a real doll: it consisted only of pale face and pale hands stitched on to some flowing black material. It was more like a ventriloquist's dummy. He stepped closer. With a shock of surprise he caught sight of his grandmother's black shoes with their diamanté buckles. There were swelling, round the straps and he could see the contours of corns and bunions. He forced himself to look into the face. The purplish hue had gone. The flesh had sunk. The wrinkles at the corners of the mouth looked as if they had been stitched. The eyes were closed: the lids looked as if they had been unrolled for the first time. They were coppery in colour, freckled with brown spots. They lay above the cheek-bones like dead moths.

He leaned closer. He began to feel the terror and guilt ebbing away. But at that moment he thought he saw the right arm move and the finger open. He turned and fled, slamming the door behind him. Uncle Hector was coming down the stairs. He stopped on the bottom step. 'What are you doing in there, boy?' Alan's teeth were chattering.

'Poking your nose in where it's not wanted!' Uncle Hector

thundered. 'In *there*, of all places! Have you no proper feelings, boy?'

Alan found his tongue. 'Uncle,' he whispered, 'Uncle . . . Granny . . . her arm moved!'

• 'Don't talk nonsense!' Uncle Hector glanced uneasily over Alan's head.

'It *did*, Uncle!' Alan was seized by an overwhelming desire to take his uncle into his confidence.

'Uncle,' he pleaded, 'I . . . I want to tell you. . . . She lifted her arm . . . like in the kitchen. . . . It was my fault. . . . I ran away! . . . She was asking me. . . . She moved her arm!'

'What *are* you babbling about? Your imagination playing tricks again – that's what comes of poking and prying. Let it be a lesson to you!' Alan ran upstairs to the back bedroom and buried himself under the bedclothes.

The funeral had no real relation to what had gone before. It was more like a pageant laid on for his and Meg's benefit. They were awed by its magnificence. Uncle Fred's employer had allowed 'favoured terms'. 'It's a kind of bonus,' Uncle Ernest explained. There was a hearse and three carriages. The coachwork, brass fittings and the coats of the horses gleamed as if they had been sprayed with lacquer. The coffin was smothered in wreaths. There were several from neighbours, including one which Mr Cowcher had made up himself. Pride of place was given to the Blounts' contribution and to one from a former neighbour of the deceased in Denton Avenue.

Alan and Meg had been surrounded by the bustle of the preparation, the brushing and ironing, the forays for black hats for the women and black ties and arm-bands for the men, the last-minute dyeing of veils, gloves and handkerchiefs, and the chattering of Aunt Glad's machine. But they were not prepared for the transformation. Even the bodies behind the clothes were set in the lineaments of mourning. They were like

wax images draped in magician's black. They would have looked just as funereal if they had worn no clothes at all.

When Great-uncle Charlie came into the middle room Alan and Meg thought it was the undertaker. He wore a three-quarter length black coat with a velvet collar: below it appeared tight black trousers. He carried black gloves and a top hat with a curly brim and a wide band of black silk. His face too was set like an effigy's: his cheeks were rigid, his moustache was so carefully waxed that it looked as if the hairs had been squeezed out of a tube.

The cousin from Canada arrived next. His gabardine was dyed black, and he had acquired a black velour trilby hat. Finally Great-aunt Gwen and her husband arrived. Great-aunt Gwen's dress reached to her ankles: she wore a long necklace of jet beads: as she walked, her head thrust forward, it swung to and fro as if she was about to lasso somebody. She wore an old boa and an arrangement of feathers on her head like a dead blackbird.

Great-uncle Edward's suit had been handed down from father to son. It was only taken out for weddings, christenings and funerals. It was russet when the light struck, but the cloth was as thick and as closely woven as felt. His shirt was the colour of old ivory. The front was as stiff as a board. The cuffs were so hard that his wrists looked as if they were in splints: the collar might have been made of cement: a rusty stud showed above the minute knot of his black tie.

Their faces were set in lines of determined sorrow, though Great-uncle Edward could not resist a grin as he indicated his new bowler. 'Got it for a bad debt,' he announced. 'E don't fit - but 'e's a snip!'

Uncle Hector was the last to appear. He was wearing an overcoat that seemed quite out of keeping, although it was black. It was double-breasted, with a wide belt, buttons as big as saucers, and a deep collar. It was made of a soft, woolly material.

In the confines of the middle room he looked as bulky as an Arctic explorer. The shapelessness of the overcoat communicated itself to his features; the aggressive lines had disappeared, even the big nose was a blur. His complexion was mottled. His eyes were covered with a film.

'I've caught a cold,' he explained, in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. Alan knew from the horrified glances that passed between his mother and Aunt Glad that Uncle Hector must have been at 'the drink'.

Alan and Meg felt no grief: they did not associate the long object shaped like a sentry-box with their grandmother. They watched the mourners fall into step behind the undertaker's men. The women walked with small, tottering steps: they leaned on their husbands' arms as if they were in danger of collapse. When they reached the carriages they got in very slowly, helped by their husbands. The men assumed a brisker air; they clapped their hats on their heads preparatory to hauling themselves into the carriages. Uncle Hector's hat was a black high-crowned bowler, of the type which Alan had seen on well-to-do farmers on market-days and in pictures of John Bull. When they had settled themselves they took their hats off again and laid them on their knees. The neighbours congregated at their gates: the men had put on their hats so that they could doff them as the cortège passed. The bus came along Majuba Road. It slowed down behind the carriages until it reached the corner. Alan and Meg were convinced that this was a tribute specially arranged by the City Fathers.

They spent the next few hours under Mrs Cowcher's eye. When they heard the rattle of returning wheels, they hurried back into their own house. They waited in the middle room, smiling as if to welcome the mourners back from an outing.

But they looked stunned and flattened. Their funeral clothes seemed to have no further connection with them. They looked

as if they might at any moment creep out of them as from small caves. They sat for several minutes without uttering a word. The furtive glances they darted at each other reminded Alan of those he had seen on the faces of people coming away from an accident: they had the same withdrawn, bitter look.

At length Alan's mother brought in glasses of port wine and biscuits. Murmurs of conversation sprang up: the voices had a hushed droning tone. Suddenly Uncle Hector began to cry. He pulled his chair into a corner, rested his hands on his thick thighs and sobbed with a deep guffawing noise.

'He was very attached to Mother,' Aunt Glad whispered.

'More attached to that flask of 'is!' Great-uncle Edward said.

Alan's mother looked shocked. 'Surely you don't mean . . .'

'E was swigging it all the way there an' back.'

'Not to mention *in* the cemetery, when 'e thought nobody was lookin',' his wife added.

'Standin' on the edge o' the beyond and 'oöer'in'. It fair gave me the creeps!'

'No respect for the dead.'

'I've no doubt the yawnin' grave put 'im on mind of 'is sins.'

'That doesn't alter the fact,' Aunt Glad interrupted, 'that he was devoted to Mother'

'Lor' *luv-a-duck!*' Great-uncle Edward exclaimed, patting his niece's arm. 'Yer don't think them tears is real, do you? Why, they're *babby's* tears!'

Uncle Hector leaped to his feet and made for the door. There was no doubt about the pungent wreath he left behind.

Alan followed. If he could assure Uncle Hector of his love now, he told himself, he might perhaps be able to persuade him to listen to his secret. Surely Uncle Hector would be able to dispense pardon?

He caught hold of the tail of his coat. 'Uncle,' he began. Uncle Hector turned, cuffed him, and, breaking once more into loud sobs, stumbled up the stairs. Alan returned to the

middle room, and joined Meg in the corner by the bamboo table. His ears were singing. To his surprise he found that he was not crying. He realised that it was not sorrow he felt but anger.

- Great-aunt Gwen put away her handkerchief as if to denote that the proprieties had received their due.

'Well, did she say anything?' she asked in a brisk voice.

Aunt Glad stared.

'There's no need to look blank, me girl. I'm askin' if me sister *said* anything.'

'She rambled a lot . . .'

'Oh ah, I dare say. But I expect' she said something else, eh? Some instructions, f'r example. . . .'

'Instructions?'

'Wy,' Great uncle Edward said, 'yer aunt means . . . *death-bed wishes*.'

Aunt Glad looked bewildered.

'Wy, 'er bits an' pieces!' her aunt snapped.

'What bits and pieces?'

'Yer not tellin' me she didn't want 'er own flesh and blood to 'ave a share!' Great-aunt Gwen took out her handkerchief again. 'Somethink to *remember* 'er by. Many's the time she said to me: "Gwen, if I goes afore you I want yer to 'ave yer share." Didn't she, Edward?'

'Many's the time,' he echoed in a sorrowful voice.

'Not that we want to bother you *now*,' Great-aunt Gwen said with a melancholy smile. 'We don't want to rush things—that wouldn't be proper. Jus' you put me share aside an' I'll come back in a few days' time.'

'You'll get none of Mam's "bits and pieces"!' Aunt Glad snapped.

'Oh, wot's this?'

'I'd rather diop dead than see *you* walk off with Mother's things.'

'Gladys,' Alan's mother protested, 'you shouldn't use such an expression. It's tempting Providence.'

'As a matter of fact,' Aunt Glad said coldly, 'we're going to sell Mother's things to pay for the funeral.'

Great-uncle Edward shook his head.

'I *thought* yer was doin' things too lavish.'

'Too lavish by 'alf,' his wife agreed.

'It's one thing to pay respec' to the dead . . .

'But another to cheat the livin' out o' wot rightly belongs to them.'

'How dare you wrangle over Mother!' Alan's father suddenly exclaimed. Alan had never seen him so angry. 'Here's Mother not cold in her grave and all you can do is snivel about her bits and pieces! I'm surprised at *you*, Glad!'

Aunt Glad hung her head.

'I will not have it,' he continued. 'If you can't behave I must ask you to leave.'

'Wy, don't take on so, Arthur,' his aunt said ingratiatingly.

'No offence, me boy,' her husband added.

'P'raps we'll just take that writin'-cabinet ~~he~~ told us we could 'ave back, eh? An' then we'll say no more about it.'

'That you don't! This is a day of mourning, and if you can't remember it . . .'

'All right, me boy, all right, we was just goin'! We meant no disrespec'.'

'No disrespec' at all.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alan rubbed his eyes in astonishment: he tried to remember the exact moment when spring had arrived. Snow, frost and slush had seemed the interminable conditions of life. One day they dappled the grass, the next they had disappeared like chalk wiped off a blackboard. The acrid smell of winter had gone. It was as if it had been thrown down a pit and new air had rushed in to take its place. It was warm and gentle to the nostrils: under its touch the garden came to life: the tufts of grass, like mildewed mop-heads, shook themselves free of frost as if a comb had passed through them. The den knit together: the green studs, so hard that they could be scratched off like pimples, broke into rosettes. It had looked like a lattice of dry sticks: now it was slanted with green. The moss between the tiles of the yard was as soft as velvet. The pear tree in the tacky earth by the fence obstinately began to bud again.

And with the coming of spring Uncle Hector recovered his spirits. His star had been in eclipse. The inhabitants of Number Twenty Majuba Road could not easily forget his behaviour at the funeral. His gratuity, moreover, showed signs of running out. His demobilisation leave had finished long ago. It had been a bitter blow to realise that the captain's uniform, now hung up under a bolster-case, would no longer grace his broad shoulders. Even Alan's mother was disillusioned. Uncle Ernest had hinted that he was looking for a ship and finding captains' tickets 'two a penny'. He had pointed out that he consumed a good deal of food and drink.

But Uncle Hector spoke grandly of 'a job in the City' which Nurse Crossett's father was about to obtain for him. When he

borrowed two pounds from Alan's father he assured him that it would be repaid tenfold. He explained to Uncle Ernest that he had not called upon him, because, although he knew how much he would have 'appreciated the opportunity', with his 'uncertain prospects' he was 'hardly in a position to comply'. He took to driving about Cranwyck with Nurse Crossett. Although 'poor Cora' was fast becoming a memory, his sisters-in-law were pleasurably shocked. They professed indignation when he drove past the Blounts' house, slowing down deliberately if he saw Mrs Blount at the window, but speculated romantically as to his motives.

'Does he care for her after all?' Aunt Glad hazarded.

'Perhaps it's *revenge*,' Alan's mother replied, her eyes round.

What Mrs Blount herself thought they had no way of telling. She no longer visited them. Mr Blount had at last taken to his bed and so the neighbours informed them, his wife seldom left his side. Mrs Cowcher helped with the cooking and cleaning.

Without warning, Uncle Hector brought Nurse Crossett herself to tea at Number Twenty. She was tall and slim, with a pale oval face and smooth black hair which grew close to her head and curved down on either side of her face like a toque. She spoke in a drawling voice which matched the lines of her dress, the drooping necklace, the bag that hung from her arm on a long loop and the fur that fell away from her shoulders. When she shook hands with Alan and Meg she wiped her fingers on a lace-edged handkerchief.

Alan's mother and Aunt Glad rushed to and fro removing the traces of their own tea, replacing the cloth, surreptitiously wiping the dust off the best tea-service and bringing in fresh supplies of bread and butter and cakes. It was not until she was trapped with a cup of tea on her bony knee that Alan's mother and Aunt Glad dared scrutinise the unexpected guest. They blushed when she addressed them. In their efforts to be refined

they made mistakes in grammar. At each blunder, Nurse Crossett paused from sipping her tea and stared. Uncle Hector's grin grew broader: every now and then he broke into a chuckle. Alan did not know whether this was caused by his sister-in-laws' discomfiture or by his companion's air of languid surprise. He hated Nurse Crossett. He wanted to dash out and kick her elegant shins.

Aunt Glad too began to show signs of rebellion. Her face took on an angry flush. When Nurse Crossett politely inquired: 'Do you get up to town often?'

Aunt Glad glowered: 'What's "town"?'

'London, of course.'

'Never!' Aunt Glad snapped.

Nurse Crossett paused. 'I expect you go over to Cheltenham?'

'Oh yes,' Alan's mother hastened to assure her. 'We do - sometimes. To look at the shops you know . . .'

'I don't!' Aunt Glad said.

'Oh?'

'Oh!'

Nurse Crossett looked puzzled. She tried again.

'I believe your husband's something to do with horses?'

'He's a groom.'

'Really?'

'But now he washes cars.'

'Oh!' Nurse Crossett turned appealingly to Uncle Hector.

Now Alan's mother showed signs of agitation. Alan knew that the moment she dreaded was approaching. And at last Nurse Crossett rose to her feet and raised her eyebrows. No one moved. 'May I use your bathroom?' she said.

Her face scarlet, Alan's mother jumped up and taking the visitor by the elbow ushered her from the room. From the passage Alan heard her volubly explaining that the bathroom was 'temporarily out of order', that builders these days were so

slack, that she hoped the inconvenience would be overlooked, but that of course arrangements had been made 'in the *best* bedroom'. Aunt Glad sat glumly in her chair. Uncle Hector winked at her.

'Do you think she dresses better than Mrs Blount?' Alan's mother ventured when Nurse Crossett and Uncle Hector had gone.

'She's *smart* all right.'

'Yes.' There was a long pause.

'A bit *showy* though?' Alan's mother suggested a few minutes later.

'Oh, she carries a month's wages on her back.'

'Yes. . . . But . . . *smart*. . . .'

'Yes. . . .'

'I think Mrs Blount's more *restrained*?'

'*She's* not a walking clothes-horse!'

There was another pause. Alan's mother began again:

'Rather too Londony, don't you think?'

Mrs Blount's got the real taste – you've got to admit it.'

'Oh yes! . . . I think she's more . . . *moor*. . . .'

'There's no question of it.'

'Yes.' The two women sighed: they were feeling better.

'I think Nurse Crossett is *expensive*,' Alan's mother summed up, 'but Mrs Blount is *superior*.'

'Nurse Crossett,' Aunt Glad snapped, 'is a bitch!'

'Never mind, Hector,' Aunt Glad told him when he announced that Nurse Crossett had gone back to London. 'Plenty more fish in the sea.'

'Oh, you're right!' Uncle Hector winked at his sisters-in-law in turn.

'I expect,' Alan's mother said, blushing, 'she makes *demands*.'

'She's been brought up to expect the best. Nothing but the best.' He added ruefully: 'As a matter of fact I shall have to sell the car . . .'

'Oh no!' Alan's mother exclaimed. 'What a shame! I was telling Glad just now that she looked rather *expensive* . . .'

'Oh, she expects a lot – she certainly expects a lot.' The two women regarded him with admiration. Uncle Hector looked relieved that they had accepted the romantic explanation about the car.

'She's very handsome,' Alan's mother began again.

'Yes. You've got to admit that, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'Of course she's not quite *our* style . . .'

'Yes. I see what you mean.'

'She has rather a . . . rather an unusual expression, hasn't she?'

Uncle Hector grinned 'A little . . . distant, eh?' he said.

'Yes! That's it! Distant . . . just a little bit . . . haughty.'

'It's her refinement of course.' Uncle Hector had difficulty in keeping a straight face.

'Oh yes! That's what it is. . . . But I know what you mean . . . distant . . . haughty . . . perhaps even . . .?'

'Cold?'

'Yes, that's it! Just the word I would have used. . . . But of course she is very good-looking . . .'

'Yes. You thought that too?'

'Oh, but of course! And *very* refined.'

'A real lady, eh?'

'That's it! A real lady. . . . But rather . . . cold.'

'You know, Hector,' Aunt Glad concluded, 'Lil and I can't help wondering whether she's really *your* style.'

Uncle Hector was more gallant and attentive than ever to his sisters-in-law. He delighted to set them against each other. One day he would concentrate upon Aunt Glad, leaning forward when she spoke, nodding his head respectfully, while he ignored Alan's mother or brusquely answered her over his shoulder, switching his eyes quickly back to Aunt Glad's face.

Sometimes he pretended to forget her presence altogether, uttering such remarks as: 'Oh, you still there, Lil?' The next day the position would be reversed and she would receive all the attention, while Aunt Glad wriggled in her chair.

One day he steered the conversation back to Nurse Crossett.

'She has an excellent figure, don't you think?'

'Oh yes!' Aunt Glad agreed. 'Very . . . slim.'

'*Slender* I should say,' Alan's mother amended.

'Slender? Ye . . . s,' Aunt Glad said thoughtfully. 'She certainly hasn't got much . . .'

'Flesh?' Uncle Hector inquired, his blue eyes wide.

'Oh, you'd hardly call her fleshy!' The women laughed.

'In fact,' Aunt Glad began, 'there are some who would call her . . . I hardly like to say it . . .'

'Oh, do go on!' Uncle Hector said. 'It's between relations.'

'Well, what do you think, Lil? Don't you think some people might say she was . . .'

'Skinny, do you mean?'

'That's going too far!'

'Well, that's what you meant.'

'I didn't!'

'You did!'

'It was *you* who said it.'

'*You* put the words in my mouth.'

'Ladies! Ladies!' Uncle Hector interrupted 'Neither of *you* need fear competition.' His sisters-in-law bridled. 'Now let me see,' Uncle Hector continued, glancing from one to the other. 'I can't quite remember *which* of you won that competition with the sixpence . . .'

Aunt Glad looked sour. Alan's mother raised her head. 'I think it was *me* . . .'

'Well, there's one way of proving it.'

'Oh, I don't think Arthur would like it.'

'Arthur would like his tea!' Alan's father had suddenly

appeared in the doorway. Uncle Ernest was standing behind him. His wife hurried off to the kitchen. Alan's father gave a brief glance in Uncle Hector's direction and sat down to the table.

Uncle Ernest bounded into the room 'What's this? What's this?' he demanded.

'What's this? What's this?' Uncle Hector mimicked

'What have you been up to?' Uncle Ernest continued. His features were more pinched: there were cracks in his leathery skin: his breeches were spotted with grease.

'What's been happening?' he looked suspiciously at Uncle Hector.

'Nothing, you fool!' his wife snapped.

The visits to the Guv'nor's garage had been discontinued. Aunt Glad and Alan's mother were on bad terms again, and as Uncle Hector bestowed his company separately, neither dared leave the house for fear of ceding an advantage. At tea-times he descended the stairs with a deliberate tread. In the passage he paused to light a cigarette or tie his shoe-lace. Then he would knock loudly on one of the doors. Once inside the room he sat close to the wall and spoke in a loud voice, or lapsed into long provocative silences. He grinned when a banging of crockery or the angry stirring of a teaspoon came from the room next door.

Aunt Glad emerged from the middle room dressed to go out. In the passage she encountered her sister-in-law, also in hat and coat. The women stared at each other.

'Hector is taking me to the pictures,' Aunt Glad announced.

'I beg your pardon! He asked *me*'

'But this is Thursday.'

'I know it's Thursday.' They folded their hands and compressed their lips. Uncle Hector came down the stairs whistling.

'Hector!' the women exclaimed.

'Oh . . . ah?' He grinned.

'You asked *me!*'

'No! You asked *me!*'

'Deuced careless of me. Must have got the dates mixed up!'

The women looked as if they were about to burst into tears.

'Well, we shall all have to go, shan't we?' Uncle Hector said.

'But Ernest?'

'But Arthur?'

'Haven't you left their tea?'

'Oh yes!'

'Well, come along then.'

When Alan's father and Uncle Ernest came in they read the notes their wives had left. Alan's father took his tea into the middle room. Uncle Ernest made for the cask of cider. '*Damn Hector!*' he said at every swig. His brother-in-law said nothing. The women returned looking sheepish. Back in the front room Alan's mother began to recite the story of the film: Alan's father did not interrupt her as he usually did with questions about the plot. Meanwhile Aunt Glad was half-pushing, half-leading Uncle Ernest to bed. Alan heard them quarrelling late into the night. A sound came from Uncle Hector's room: Alan could not determine whether it was snore or smothered guffaw.

The two women, peace restored, were seated round the fireplace. Uncle Hector was telling their fortunes from a pack of cards. Alan's father and Uncle Ernest were eating their high tea.

'A tall stranger. I see a tall stranger.' The women looked up at Uncle Hector, their mouths held ready to laugh.

'A stranger from far away,' he continued. 'Here he is, you see!'

'It's a knave!' Aunt Glad squealed.

'A knave of hearts,' Alan's mother blushed.

'And look here,' Uncle Hector said, 'the poor fellow doesn't know *which* way to turn.' The women broke into peals of laughter. Uncle Hector turned up another card.

'Ah,' he said, 'a journey.'

'A journey?'

'A *short* journey,' he added quickly. 'A short journey and an invitation.' He winked at the women.

Uncle Ernest scowled as he drank his tea. His brother-in-law was eating a plate of cockles sprinkled with pepper and vinegar. It was his favourite dish. This was the first time he had eaten them since Uncle Hector's arrival: he had bought them on his way home from work.

'Please wash these,' he had said handing them to his wife.

'But Hector will be in the middle room.'

'I wish I'd brought whelks!'

'Arthur!' Alan's mother had been shocked. Whelks were even more 'common' than cockles. It was rare too for her husband to make a joke: it was usually a sign that he was about to enter 'one of his obstinate moods'. She had washed the cockles.

He speared them on the prongs of his fork and chewed each mouthful slowly so that the muscles of his cheeks moved up and down. The fork made a musical scraping noise every time it descended on the plate. It had a soporific effect upon Alan and he was falling into a doze when Uncle Hector repeated in a sharper voice:

'An *invitation*!'

'Oh yes, I see!' Aunt Glad cast a cursory glance at her husband, and a more dubious one at her brother. 'Go on, Lil,' she said. 'You tell them.' Alan's mother shook her head.

There was silence for a few moments and then Alan's father, with a placid glance in her direction, said: 'Yes, go on, Lil.'

'Well,' she said at length, 'Hector has asked us to go to the pictures with him tomorrow . . .'

'What! The whole family? Can he afford it?'

'No . . . o,' she quavered. 'Just me and Glad . . '

'The two Graces!' Uncle Hector cried. 'An old sailor man can't resist them.'

The two Graces laughed uncertainly.

'You don't mind, do you, Arthur?' Alan's mother said.

'Yes,' he replied.

'Oh, then, that's all right!'

'Um . . . um.' Alan's father held up his hand while he finished another forkful of cockles. When he had swallowed them he said:

'I didn't say "Yes, I don't mind", but "Yes, I *do* mind".' Ping! Ping! went the fork as he herded the remainder of the cockles into a corner of the plate.

'What . . . what do you mean, Arthur dear?'

'What I say. You're not to go out with Hector tomorrow.'

'Whatever for?'

'Because I say so. I want you to get my tea . . . I'll have cockles again, by the way.'

Uncle Hector recovered from his astonishment and guffawed. 'Listen to Bluebeard!' he cried.

His brother-in-law looked at him through his pince-nez. There were only a few cockles left now: he ate them one at a time.

'And what about me?' Aunt Glad burst out, hands on hips.

'You too,' he replied.

'What business is it of yours?' Uncle Hector bellowed.

His brother-in-law ignored him. 'Ernie doesn't want you to go, do you, Ernie?'

Uncle Ernest grinned enthusiastically. 'No, that's right!'

'What's all this? What's the meaning of it?' Uncle Hector's complexion deepened to its port-wine hue. 'I suppose you'll be telling me that Ernie wants cockles for tea tomorrow too!'

'No,' Alan's father replied. 'He doesn't approve of you taking Lil and Glad out.'

Uncle Ernest nodded. 'That's right!' His cheerful monkey expression had returned. 'You bloody well stay at home, my

girl!' he said, turning to Aunt Glad. She lay back in her chair speechless.

'What do you mean? Explain yourself!' Uncle Hector roared.

'Me and Ernie don't like Lil and Glad gadding about with you, that's all,' Alan's father said. He spoke absent-mindedly: he was encountering difficulty in transfixing the last cockle. This put Uncle Hector off his stride: he watched his brother-in-law's manoeuvres as if he were hypnotised.

At length the cockle was disposed off. Alan's father laid down his fork with a sigh. 'By the way,' he said, 'you were wrong about that card.'

'Eh?' Uncle Hector's jaw fell.

'I mean about going a short journey.'

'Eh?'

'Well, it's going to be a long journey.'

There was a stunned silence. 'What do you mean, Arthur boy?' Uncle Ernest asked at length in an awed voice.

'Well, I think it's time we had the house to ourselves,' Alan's father said in his mildest tones. He turned to Uncle Hector.

'I think you said you had to go to London soon?'

'Well . . . yes . . . but . . .'

'Surely that big job in the City hasn't fallen through?'

'What? Oh . . . well, no. . . . Of course not! But it doesn't do to rush . . .'

'I shouldn't let the grass grow under your feet if I were you.' He looked down at the empty plate, sighed and pushed it aside.

'Would Saturday suit you, Hector?'

'Did Hector catch the eleven-thirty?' Alan's father asked when he came home for lunch on Saturday.

'Well, no, as a matter of fact he didn't.' His wife looked at him cautiously.

'Why not?'

'Well, you see he had a letter from Nurse Crosscut. There's

been a hitch about that City job, he says. There's no point in dashing off now, he says. . . . He thought you wouldn't mind . . .'

'Where is he?'

'He went to Cheltenham for the morning. He didn't want to embarrass you, he said. Very gentlemanly of him, I thought.'

After lunch Alan's father knocked at the door of the middle room. Uncle Ernest answered it. His hang-dog expression had returned. 'His nibs is still here,' he said. His brother-in-law whispered in his ear. Uncle Ernest's face lit up. 'No!' he exclaimed. 'You wouldn't dare!' He followed his brother-in-law upstairs.

A few minutes later the two women hurried into the passage as bangings and bumpings were heard from above. Uncle Ernest appeared at the top of the stairs. 'Ernest,' Aunt Glad screamed, 'what *are* you doing?'

He staggered down with two of Uncle Hector's leather cases. They were packed to the brim: articles of clothing protruded from the lids. He dropped the cases on the floor. 'Arthur told me,' he said and darted back up the stairs. He returned with two other cases. Finally he and his brother-in-law carried down the wooden chest.

'I think that's all,' Alan's father said, regarding the heap of luggage. He had placed Uncle Hector's trench coat, shooting-stick and binoculars on top of it. The women began to wail:

'Oh, what will Hector say!' . . . 'Look what you've done to his shirts!' . . . 'His beautiful shirts!' . . . 'Oh, poor Hector!' . . . 'You brutes!'

Alan's father whispered further instructions in his brother-in-law's ear. He dashed out of the house, returning a few minutes later murmuring: 'Oh, Arthur's the lad! Good old Arthur! Watch out for Arthur when he gets his dander up!'

Uncle Hector returned. Alan's father met him in the passage. Uncle Ernest retreated half-way up the stairs. The others

watched from the doorway of the middle room. Uncle Hector stared at the pile of luggage.

'Sorry you missed your train this morning, Hector,' Alan's father said, blinking through his pince-nez. 'But never mind. Ernie and me have packed your things for you. You'll catch the three-thirty easy.'

Uncle Hector swallowed. He looked at his watch. 'But I can't carry all this lot to the station,' he cried triumphantly. 'I've sold the car!'

'Oh, don't worry!' Alan's father assured him. 'We've seen to that for you.' The taxi which Uncle Ernest had been sent to order hooted its horn outside.

At the sound Uncle Ernest ran down the stairs and seized Uncle Hector by the hand. 'Good-bye, old man! Glad we were able to help. Aunt Glad and Alan's mother, taken out of their stride by the suddenness of it all, began to weep into their aprons. There was a knock at the front door. Uncle Ernest threw it open. The taxi-driver advanced into the passage, picked up two of the cases and left the house at a trot. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad rushed at Uncle Hector and threw their arms round his neck. His bewildered face emerged every now and then from the encircling arms to stare at the rapidly diminishing pile of luggage. At length it was all loaded. Alan's mother and Aunt Glad, each clasping an arm, accompanied Uncle Hector to the gate. To right and left along Majuba Road, front doors were opened and curtains twitched. Borne along on the tide of departure, Uncle Hector, before he had properly realised what was happening, found himself standing at the door of the taxi. Alan dashed upstairs and into Uncle Hector's bedroom. His father and Uncle Ernest had been thorough: even the old calendar, with a picture of a girl with bare legs and big white fur, had been removed. But on the floor, between the bed and the wall, he found the leather case that contained Uncle Hector's hairbrushes. He snatched it up, dashed downstairs

and out into the street. The taxi had not gone: the driver was tightening the straps round the luggage. Uncle Hector was standing by the open door staring into the interior of the taxi. Alan pulled at his sleeve. He handed him the leather case, proud to have rendered him a service at last. Uncle Hector took it and tried to push it into the side pocket of his coat. It wouldn't go. He handed it back to Alan.

'Here, you have it,' he said. 'Something to remember me by.' Alan put both hands round the case: he held it away from him as if it were made of gossamer. Uncle Hector clambered into the taxi. He pulled down the window and looked out. 'That's right,' he said. 'Something to remember me by!' He looked over Alan's head. At the front gate the women were waving their tear-crumpled handkerchiefs: Alan's father stood in the doorway. The dazed look left Uncle Hector's face. He began to laugh. He laughed so loudly that the driver came round to see what was the matter. He leaned out of the window and saluted his brother-in-law in a gesture half mocking, half comradely. Solemnly Alan's father returned the salute. The taxi drew away from the house. Uncle Hector's laughter rose above the roar of the exhaust and the redoubled sobbing of the women. Long after the taxi had passed out of sight his laughter echoed up and down Majuba Road like the distant mutter of thunder.

Alan slept with the leather case beside him. If it rolled away, Meg retrieved it and placed it back into position so that he could feel its outlines and smell the leather the moment he woke up. He could not look his father in the face. The fact that it was he who had, incredibly, been the victor, made his devotion to Uncle Hector burn more fiercely. And what would his grandmother have said? He thought a good deal about his grandmother. At night he had imagined he could hear her footsteps or the creaking of her bed. On several occasions he could have sworn that he had seen her peering at him on the dimly-

lit landing. The memory of her stroke, of the arm raised in supplication and of his own betrayal gave him no peace.

One afternoon he was alone in the house. He felt the atmosphere tighten, as if a muffled drum was beating. The evil forces of the past, he felt, were gathering. He ran into the passage, intending to leave the house. He could not get beyond the foot of the stairs: rustlings, whispers, voices reached out at him from all sides. From the direction of the kitchen he thought he heard a soft moan. There was a movement at the top of the stairs. He peered up into the shadows. He heard the whisper: 'Alan! Alan!' There was a sound behind him. With a sob he turned round. His father stood in the doorway. 'A good job I got back early, wasn't it?' He took him into the front room and they sat down. Before he realised what was happening Alan had poured out the whole story. 'There was nothing you could do,' his father told him when he had finished. 'It was a stroke: nobody could have helped her.' Alan felt that the stone he had been carrying inside him had suddenly melted.

On the Saturday his father took him to the cemetery. He had not visited his grandmother's grave before. The earth was streaked with yellow clay, but the grass was thick and juicy. The women had planted primroses: the bigger leaves were crisp and dark, ribbed like sand: the unopened leaves stood up like tightly-rolled spills, the petals shining through in slits and wheels of pure light. The freshness and greenness made his grandmother's death seem real to him for the first time: the mound of earth was like a body curled in sleep. His father pointed to it. 'You see—she is here.' Alan believed it at last. In the long grass near-by lay the brown and withered remains of the wreaths. When they returned to the house in Majuba Road it was full of the light of primroses.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The hedge had burst into particularly vigorous growth this summer. There were branches everywhere. From the outside the hedge was a green hedgehog: even Alan and Meg had to search for the opening into the den. Inside new shoots brushed their faces. It was dark and cool. They might have been at the bottom of an aquarium: the flecks of light broke through like goldfish. In the garden beyond there was a riot of heat and colour. The grass had never been thicker: it had completely covered the old logs, wrapping them round in green and yellow strands like snakes. The stems of the flowers were like braced legs: the petals stretched out like arms. The raspberry canes had reached the dimensions of young bamboos: the flecks of red were as big as rose-buds.

Alan watched Meg out of the corner of his eyes. She had finished her apple, and now she was burying the core under a mound of dried twigs, leaves and berries. She was utterly absorbed. She had forgotten that tomorrow she would be leaving. Uncle Ernest had obtained a post as head groom at a country house in Wales. Victor had found a job near-by and he and Molly were getting married as soon as they arrived. For days Meg had talked about nothing else but the move. Now the only thing that was real to her was the apple core. He felt a pang of envy.

The sun was beginning to set behind the back streets when their mothers called them. The hedges cast long shadows across the grass. When they stood up the garden was still humming with heat: the window of the middle room was a blaze of crimson and copper. They walked down the path: the tufts of

grass on either side brushed their ankles. When they reached the yard Tony flopped out from behind the water-butt. The pear tree had grown right away from the fence: its spindly branches with their defiant sprays of green reached half-way across the yard. The women were always complaining, and their husbands always promising to do something about it.

In the kitchen Alan's mother and Aunt Glad were putting the finishing touches to the preparations for the farewell party. Their aprons were streaked with flour, their forearms red from the oven. The curlers in their hair rattled as they dashed to and fro. Aunt Glad seized Meg and began to wash her face. She howled when the soap got in her eyes. Her mother took off her clothes, snatched clean ones from the line and thrust them over her head: the buttons of the vest were still hot from the iron and Meg yelled again. She found a scorch-mark and sniffed it, forgetting her tears. When they were both washed and dressed they were dismissed with strict injunctions not to get dirty again. They went into the passage. Trunks and packing cases stood against the wall.

They entered the middle room. The arm-chairs and several other pieces of furniture had been removed. The table had been pulled into the centre of the room. An upturned box had been placed against one end, the join camouflaged by a cloth. The first instalment of the meal had already been set out – cold roast beef, a ham, cheese, pickles, a fruit cake, plates of rock-cakes and tarts, and in a mixing-bowl a huge trifle surmounted by custard, cream and patterns of skinned almonds. There were bottles of beer and stout and, within easy reach of Uncle Ernest's place, a hogshead of cider. Alan went over to the bamboo table; but it had been pushed against the wall and cases and parcels had been stacked beneath it.

Uncle Ernest was the first to come back from work. He was in high spirits because he would soon be among 'self-respecting

creatures with four legs'. He made straight for the cider, filled a mug and took it with him to his bedroom while he changed into his best blue serge coat and his best breeches. When he returned to the middle room, he filled the mug again. 'What! Already, Ernest?' Alan's mother said. She spoke mildly: her brother-in-law had gone up in her estimation now that he had got a job with 'feal gentry'. When Aunt Glad entered she frowned: Uncle Ernest winked at her. It had been like old times since the departure of Uncle Hector and the decision to leave the garage. Aunt Glad and Uncle Ernest laughed and chattered as they had done in the past. Aunt Glad brandished her darning-needle and sometimes used it, and occasionally Uncle Ernest boxed her ears.

When Molly and Alan's father came home they changed into their best clothes and both families gathered in the middle room to await their guests. Victor came first, but he was now regarded as one of the family. Great-uncle Charlie and the cousin from Canada followed. Great-uncle Charlie threw back the skirts of his overcoat. 'Hey presto!' he boomed, and he began to produce bottles of all shapes and sizes. A space had to be cleared for them. Together with the bottles of beer and stout they stretched the whole length of the table and its appendage. The cousin from Canada wore his gabardine: there was nothing in his pockets.

The Guv'nor and his family brought several cold chickens and a brace of pigeons. They all sat up to the table. The bottles of beer and stout were opened. But Uncle Ernest kept to his cider: there was applause every time he got up to refill his mug. Alan and Meg were too awed at the sight of the loaded table to eat, but they sipped at their ginger wine. The grown-ups grew more and more talkative and laughed more and more loudly. Even the Guv'nor's face turned pink and for the first time they heard him laugh aloud.

There was a return to sobriety when Mrs Blount arrived: her

husband had died six weeks before. She looked very beautiful, Alan thought, in her black clothes: her perfume made a welcome change from the smell of the beer and stout. She explained that she could not, 'under the circumstances', join their party. She shook hands with Uncle Ernest, and kissed Molly and Victor. Aunt Glad left the room with her. From the passage they heard the sound of embraces and fervent promises to write.

Aunt Glad was tearful when she returned.

'When I think what that . . . that *monster* made her suffer!' she cried.

'Monster? What monster?' Great-uncle Charlie asked.

'Hector, of course!'

Alan's mother nodded and sighed.

'How we suffered him in the house for so long *I* can't imagine,' Aunt Glad continued.

'Well, he got his marching orders, didn't he?' Her sister-in-law looked at her husband and giggled.

'I should think he did!' Aunt Glad cried. 'You should have seen our Arthur!' She turned to Great-uncle Charlie and told him the story.

Alan's father kept taking off his pince-nez, rubbing them and protesting: 'Now! Now! *Please!*'

'Good for Arthur!' Great-uncle Charlie cried when Aunt Glad had finished. 'A toast! A toast to Arthur!' They stood up and drank, except for the cousin from Canada who took the opportunity to help himself to a wing of chicken. They sat down again.

Alan's mother sighed. 'But he *was* such a gentleman,' she said.

'What! Hector a gentleman?' Aunt Glad cried. 'Why,' and she looked round the room, 'why, Nipper over there is more of a gentleman!' As if in protest, Nipper, with a loud 'prrm!' emerged from a corner and darted out through the half-open door.

'He thought you were questioning his manhood!' Great-uncle Charlie roared. There was a shout of laughter. Alan's mother frowned.

'Anyway,' Uncle Ernest said, helping himself to another mug of cider, 'there was a time when you were pretty sweet on him yourself.'

'What! *Me?*' Aunt Glad screamed.

'Yes, you!'

'Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Oh!' she spluttered, the red coming and going in her cheeks 'How *dare* you suggest such a thing?'

'Oh, I saw you setting your cap at him,' Uncle Ernest said, winking at the others.

'You! . . . You! . . . You!' Aunt Glad nearly choked. She darted from the table and rushed over to the spot where she kept the sewing-machine. It had been moved to make way for the hog'shead of cider.

'Why, Glad,' Uncle Ernest said, 'were you looking for something?' He turned and winked again at the company. 'Perhaps, my dear, you want a glass of cider? Didn't know you liked the stuff.'

Aunt Glad lifted her fists: he caught her by the wrists: they swayed to and fro. Aunt Glad stamped her foot bared her teeth and tried to bite his hand. He moved it away. She went on trying. He turned to the audience and grinned every time he outwitted her manoeuvres.

'Bravo!' Great-uncle Charlie cried. 'Go it, Ernie! Go it, Glad!'

'Bravo!' they all cried.

Great-uncle Charlie stood on his chair 'That's it! That's it, Glad!' he shouted. 'Oh what a filly! . . . She's got the bit between her teeth. . . . She's coming into the straight. . . . No, he's crowded her against the fence!' They cheered and banged their glasses on the table.

Aunt Glad's strength gave out. She subsided against her hus-

band's chest with tears of vexation in her eyes. 'There! There!' Uncle Ernest said, hugging her to him. He led her back to the table. As they were about to sit down she snatched at his hand, raised it to her mouth, and bit.

• 'Why, you Bitch!' Uncle Ernest yelled.

'It was only a little one,' she said.

'Drinks all round!' Great-uncle Charlie cried. He took a corkscrew from his pocket and began to open the bottles he had brought. Uncle Hector was forgotten.

Alan felt a resurgence of the old loyalty. 'He gave me a leather case - with hairbrushes in it,' he said. But no one had heard him.

Great-uncle Charlie's bottles produced a desire for entertainment. Uncle Ernest sang a comic song, capering up and down on his bandy legs, his leathery face screwed up until he stumbled against his chair and fell into it with a clatter. Alan's mother, who had begun to worry about the neighbours, whispered to Hetty and Doris. There was no piano, but they obliged with a duet. Great-uncle Charlie gave a vociferous rendering of 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo', striding up and down the room and pushing out his stomach. Then suddenly he became sad and sang 'It was only a beautiful picture, in a be-yew-tiful golden frame!' He had a fruity baritone voice: the women dabbed their eyes with their handkerchiefs. It was getting hot. Great-uncle Charlie took off his coat: his waistcoat was festooned with chains, alberts, medallions and rows of pens and pencils with metal tops so that he looked as if he were wearing a hussar's tunic. The silk back of the waistcoat shone with sweat: the sleeves of his shirt were caught up above the elbow by steel arm-bands as big as handcuffs. Aunt Glad drew the curtains and threw open the window. The sight of the garden bathed in moonlight and the jade-coloured sky caused everybody to fall silent. They could hear the tap-tapping of Mr Cowcher's hoe as he worked on one of his overnight

transformations. From the back streets, as if in mockery at their silence, there came a gust of raucous laughter and the sound of a concertina. Alan's mother looked at the clock. The guests began to depart. They kissed Aunt Glad in turn. Uncle Ernest, his mug at his side, lay across the table, his head on his outstretched arms. As the visitors passed, they raised one of his hands and then let it fall; he grunted in acknowledgement. The cousin from Canada asked Alan's father for a loan. Absent-mindedly he complied.

When the visitors had gone, Meg was discovered sleeping at the other end of the table in exactly the same posture as her father. Molly carried her off to bed. Aunt Glad helped Uncle Ernest to his feet. Alan's mother shook her head and tut-tutted. When Alan reached his bedroom Molly was already asleep. He went over to the window and leaned out. The air was warm and still. Mr Cowcher was on his hands and knees at one of his flower-beds: he could hear the patting of his trowel and the sound of his breathing. The slamming of a door somewhere in the back streets was like a pistol-shot: a distant cough seemed to come from the next room. When Greg threw open his window and sounded a blast on his bugle it was like the braying of a donkey. Mr Cowcher jumped as if he had been stung. Several cats burst from the hedges and darted across the garden. The birds in the ivy below Alan's window twittered. From the 'Travers' house came a chorus of infuriated voices. Greg retreated, slamming the window behind him: the echoes, like spray from a wave, gradually died down. Mr Cowcher gathered up his tools and tiptoed back into his house. The coughing from the back streets subsided in a last rasp, like a nail on sandpaper. A final chirrup, almost inaudible, came from the ivy. The moon, as if throwing off a last veil, suddenly stood out, brilliantly naked. The scent of the elder-flowers reached Alan's nostrils. He looked over his shoulder at Meg. He was disappointed that she had fallen asleep on their last night together. But when he

climbed into bed she turned in her sleep and clasped her arms around him.

Meg apparently was the only one who was unaffected by the bumpings and bangings that came from other parts of the house as the removals men carried out the furniture. She went on eating her breakfast after everybody else had finished. Alan watched her. She masticated very slowly, her plump cheeks bulging, swallowing each piece as if she feared it might burn her. A crumb stuck on her upper lip. She removed it with a flick of her tongue. Then she licked her fingers, and lifting her head looked straight at him. Her eyes were wide and blue: the whites, too, had a bluish tinge, like a duck egg. Suddenly she heard the wheels of the trap in which Uncle Fred was to drive them to the station. She jumped down from her chair and raced along the passage. She was impatient during the bustle of farewells. She kissed Alan perfunctorily and scrambled into the trap in order to sit next to Uncle Fred.

The others clustered in the doorway, talking loudly, repeating their promises to write over and over again, laughing and blowing their noses. But Alan's mother and Aunt Glad could not keep back their tears. They clung to each other until Victor arrived and called out that if they weren't careful they would miss the train. There was a final scurry of farewells. Alan felt a lump in his throat when Molly threw her arms round him, but his eyes were fixed beyond her on Meg. She sat unconcerned in the seat next the driver's, playing with the whip in its holder.

It was only when they had all piled into the trap and Uncle Fred had taken up the reins that Meg suddenly stood up. She looked round her uncomprehendingly: her eyes grew wide: her lips trembled.

'Alan!' she yelled at the top of her voice. 'Where's Alan?' Her mother bent down and whispered something to her. With both hands she pushed at her mother's face, knocking off her hat.

'No!' she screamed. 'No! Meg not go without Alan! Alan come too!' Before anyone could stop her she broke away, dashed to the side of the trap and climbed over. She missed her footing and fell into the roadway. The horse snorted and shied. Meg picked herself up and, blood trickling from a graze on her knee, rushed back towards the house. Her aunt tried to stop her; she side-stepped and, arms spread wide and still yelling, dashed up to Alan and flung her arms round him. Alan, too, throwing his superiority of years to the winds, lifted his head and howled. Sympathetic neighbours appeared at bay-windows and garden gates: Mrs Cowcher hovered with sweets and apples. Aunt Glad, herself in tears, scrambled out of the trap. Uncle Ernest looked anxiously at his watch. Uncle Fred got down from his seat and stroked the nose of the frightened horse. Aunt Glad picked up Meg, who resisted with all her might, holding herself stiff and kicking her legs: Aunt Glad had to hold her against her chest as if she were carrying a sack of potatoes. She handed her up to Uncle Ernest and Victor, who tried to quieten her. Aunt Glad cast a stricken look at the group gathered at the gate and got back into her seat. Uncle Fred shook the reins and the trap shot forward. All along Majuba Road, Meg's yells could be heard above the rattle of the wheels. As the trap turned the corner she let out a last despairing cry of 'Alan! Alan come too!'

Alan's father drew him back into the house. As he closed the front door it rattled with an entirely different sound, like a drum that has been loosened. It emphasised the empty spaces that called for the presence of familiar furniture, the reverberations of familiar breathing. Even in the front room Alan was aware of the emptiness that brooded in the rest of the house. It seemed impossible that the gaps could ever close, or that the house would ever knit together again. It was no use straining his ears, no use imagining unseen presences: there was not even the comfort of a haunting.

His mother, too, sat staring at the opposite wall as if she could sense the emptiness on the other side. His father puffed noisily at his pipe and rattled his newspaper, as if to fill a corner of it. At length his mother jumped to her feet.

'Well, let's have a cup of tea!' she exclaimed, with forced brightness. 'After all, it's nice to have the house to ourselves. Isn't it?'

'Isn't it?' she repeated. Her husband shook his newspaper irritably. She dashed about the room, making as much noise as possible with crockery and tea-spoons and slamming the doors of the sideboard. When the tea things were laid she ran out into the passage, but as she passed the middle room her steps slowed down and she almost tiptoed the rest of the way to the kitchen. When she returned with the tea-pot she had abandoned all attempt at cheerfulness.

Alan swallowed a mouthful of tea, but it made him choke. He got up and ran from the room. His mother stood up to follow. Her husband laid his hand on her arm. 'Leave him alone,' he said. Alan went straight to the middle room: it was best to get it over with. But he could hardly believe his eyes. It seemed to have shrunk to the dimensions of a rabbit-hutch. The walls were a gingerish colour with patches of dim patterning where the pictures had hung. Without the curtains the window was revealed as an oblong of dirty glass: the sunshine heightened the dinginess: the brownish-white droppings of a bird streaked one of the panes. On the floor-boards was a covering of grey dust, as soft as flour: it was not sufficient to keep out the chill that seeped in from the foundations. In the corner by the window he found four circular indentations where the legs of the bamboo table had stood. But he could not believe that this dismal square of a room had held objects softened and warmed by human contact, much less that it had held human beings whom he had loved. When he sat down and tried to recapture the sensation of crouching under the bamboo

table with Meg, it seemed to belong to another house and another age.

He closed the door of the middle room as if he were sealing it for ever. He walked along the passage and into the kitchen. Nipper jumped down from his place on top of his box, and rubbed against his leg with a disconsolate 'Prrr!' then walked back dejectedly. Alan opened the kitchen door and stepped into the yard. The pear tree caught at his sleeve. There was a slight rustle from behind the water-butt, as if Tony had looked out and decided to stay where he was. Alan stepped into the long grass. Mr Cowcher glanced over the top of the hedge and then quietly turned and went back into his house. Alan walked down the garden. The elder tree shook its flowers: they crumbled in the heat like cream cheese. A bee buzzed among the raspberry canes. The sun shone equably in a blue sky. He had no part in it: he felt as if the whole garden was encased under a glass dome, and he looking in from the outside. He reached the den, pushed the branches aside and entered. That, too, seemed to have shrunk: he found it hard to believe that there had been room for Meg as well. He searched among the fragments of twig and earth and uncovered the apple core she had buried there the day before. He found, too, the glass eye of one of her dolls. He sat, his chin resting on his knees. A wave of loneliness swept over him: he felt he was going to be sick. Here in the den, surrounded by the sights and sounds and smells of the garden, there was no difficulty in recapturing Meg's presence. He strained his ears, and like the murmur trapped inside a sea-shell he imagined he caught the last echo of her voice as she called his name. 'Alan! . . . Alan!' For a moment he stared through the branches, half expecting to see her plump knees level with his eyes. But he knew she had gone. Suddenly he knew, too, that by now she had dried her tears. She would have gone on calling his name until the trap had left familiar surroundings behind, perhaps even all the

way to the station. Then gradually her sobs would have subsided. For a time she would have made them at intervals, mechanically: but her eyes would have been round now with astonishment as she drank in new sights and sounds. In the railway carriage she would have forgotten to cry: she would have pressed her nose to the window, jerking her head round at every strange noise in the carriage or in the corridor beyond. She would have stared at the ticket-collector wide-eyed and would have taken the ticket from her father, smiling in wonder as he handed it over. From time to time she would have mentioned his name. 'I've wish Alan was here! . . .' 'When's Alan coming? . . . Tomorrow? . . .' But she would have forgotten these remarks as soon as she had made them. Eventually she would have put her thumb in her mouth and fallen asleep.

And when she reached her new home? She would speak of him a good deal at first. And then, as new interests and faces surrounded her, less and less, and when she did, it would be as of someone who belonged to another life. Would she, eventually, forget him altogether? His heart stood still. But his train of thought swept forward of its own momentum. Yes, perhaps she would forget him, as an individual. But at the same time he would become one of the dimly apprehended yet all-pervading influences of childhood, incorporated in her growing and changing like the blood which carries the past through the veins, although it is busy only with the present.

He did not formulate these things. He did not have the words. But he felt them. And would *he* forget her? he wondered. It was possible, he supposed: not as quickly or as completely as she might forget him, but perhaps he would forget. But in his case, too, there was a sense in which he could never forget. She had been part of his growing, and therefore she would be part of his future. A scurry of voices and laughter came from the back streets beyond the garden wall. From inside the kitchen he could hear Nipper miaowing plaintively. From somewhere

in Majuba Road came the shrill chanting of children at play. Tomorrow, or if not tomorrow, the day after, he would join them. In the Travers' back yard a hen began to cluck. Greg opened his window and sounded a few notes on his bugle. Tears flooded Alan's eyes. He felt as if his heart was breaking. In the same instant he was filled with a sensation of joy and triumph. He did not know where it came from. It was a mysterious and awe-inspiring visitation. But dimly and within the bounds of a child's comprehension he realised that he had known the reality of love. Not the love he had for his mother and father, but a love that was separate from them, that belonged to him alone. And dimly, too, he realised that it was a gift that only the privileged received, and one which would enrich and sustain him for the rest of his life.